

Mise Éire:

National and Personal Identity in Two Recent Irish Memoirs

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Abstract

Chapter One will outline the way I will be using the constructs of “national” and “personal” identity, and will then move on to provide a brief contextual setting for the creation and importance of certain literary conventions of Irish topography and character, in particular by examining the cultural nationalism in Yeats’s poems. In doing so, I will outline the metaphor of evolution which is crucial in this dissertation, and will examine some of the ethical implications of employing this metaphor. Chapter Two will examine the 1996 memoir *Angela’s Ashes* by Frank McCourt, outline McCourt’s employment of various stock Irish tropes, and show how this leads to a conflation of “personal” and “national” identity, to the detriment of the memoir. Chapter Three will turn to critique *Are You Somebody?*, the memoir by Nuala O’Faolain which was also published in 1996. I will argue that, in contrast to *Angela’s Ashes*, *Are You Somebody?* offers a constructive fusion of both kinds of identity – national and personal. In Chapter Four, I will compare and contrast key issues in the texts, in relation to their both being memoirs of (Irish) national significance, published at the same time in a changing Ireland, and I will conclude by arguing that the process of invention which is necessary for the writing of a memoir is equally necessary for the creation of a national identity.

Declaration

This study represents original work by the author and has not been submitted in any form to another university. Where use was made of the work of others it has been duly noted in the text.

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Note

Throughout this thesis, I have followed the MLA format for citation and referencing. I have, however deviated from the rules on some occasions: I have chosen to italicise titles, rather than underline them, for aesthetic reasons; I have referenced a map by name of cartographer, rather than title, for reasons which should be obvious in the text; and I have let the reader presume that, unless stated otherwise in the citation or text, any reference to McCourt's work is to *Angela's Ashes*, in order to minimise the content of citations and avoid redundancy.

Some Irish words and names, like Cathleen Ní Houlihan, are spelled differently in various texts. I have tried to establish the most formally correct spelling, and have used that one, only varying when directly quoting from other sources.

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Introduction

To commence on an appropriately personal note, this study was inspired by a changing Ireland I was lucky enough to live in for some time with my husband. Our neighbours on one side were two elderly farmers, still using the farming techniques their father used, cooking on an old Aga range, with a quintessential Irish dresser taking pride of place in the kitchen. Many of our first conversations included my descriptions of Africa, which seemed so exotic to two men who had never left Ireland. On the other side, our neighbours had satellite television, drove the latest model car, and had even spent time in Africa themselves. In a sense, they represented polar opposites on the scale of Irish identity, yet both households would have been proud to claim “*Mise Éire*”: “I am of Ireland”. In between these neighbours, we lived in a fifteenth century tower-house, which helped me to connect with a sense of “place”, history and continuity in Ireland.

Like many people, I first went to Ireland on holiday because my distant family had emigrated from there in difficult years gone by. Unlike many, I think, I was merely curious about this country, and was not looking for a sense of belonging – I was comfortable in my African identity. However, I found a family – my husband – and with that, I have come to have a specific, personal feeling of “belonging” in Ireland.

The time we spent living in Ireland was exciting for me: Ireland was as exotic to me as South Africa was to the farmers next door, and I read voraciously, and talked continually to people, trying to understand the dynamics which operated in the country. Two books which were

pivotal in reaching certain understandings about Ireland were the memoirs I will be looking at in this thesis: Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*, and Nuala O'Faolain's *Are You Somebody?*.

What made them particularly interesting was the reception they got in Ireland. On reflection, I concluded that two things affected people's reactions: firstly, the socio-economic climate in Ireland, which was reeling under various Church scandals and political exposés at the same time in which it was experiencing a previously unknown prosperity and rise in materialism; and secondly, the way the respective authors represented their identities in the memoirs. It seemed to me that the erstwhile authority figures in the nation-state of Ireland were losing their hold on the country, which, coupled with globalisation, immigration to Ireland, and Ireland's role in the European Union, radically altered Irish people's perceptions of their own national identity.

It would be wrong to over-simplify and claim that Ireland was moving into a stage of neo-nationalism. For instance, the xenophobia shown towards indigent immigrants to Ireland reveals a strengthening of some kinds of national identification, by some people. However, it would certainly be true to claim that the previous leviathans which had colluded to entrench a conservative model of political nationalism – the Church, the State, the nuclear family which was legally obliged to remain intact, and the State/Church-run education systems – were being increasingly questioned and destabilised, thus undermining the previously uncontested power they once held over Ireland. In this scene, aptly timed to coincide with a growing materialism in Ireland, one began to get a sense of a “new” kind of Irish national identity, elements of which I will argue are expressed in some recent Irish literature.

Chapter One

Romantic Ireland's Dead and Gone

Was it for this the wild geese spread
 The grey wing upon every tide;
 For this that all that blood was shed,
 For this Edward Fitzgerald died,
 And Robert Emmet and Wolfe Tone,
 All that delirium of the brave?
 Romantic Ireland's dead and gone,
 It's with O'Leary in the grave.

W. B. Yeats, "September 1913"

"Romantic Ireland" may not only be dead and gone; it may never have existed. Nevertheless, the trope of a romanticised Ireland (or, to adapt Declan Kiberd's term, an "invented" Ireland¹) is one which pervades Irish poetry, song, drama, television, film, and literature. This thesis aims to offer some ideas about the link between age-old Irish tropes, and their employment in contemporary literature. In order to examine this link, I will analyse the manifestations of the "personal" and "national" identity of two contemporary authors: Frank McCourt and Nuala O'Faolain.

When I use the term "national identity", I mean two things. Firstly, I am referring to the way in which a person feels as though she or he "belongs" to a nation. It is this meaning of national identity which I will primarily be using in this first chapter. The reasons for this

sense of belonging can be many and varied, ranging from speaking the same language, to having common enemies, to holding a shared sense of culture and “community”. As shall be made clearer in this chapter, national identity in this sense is often oppositionally defined (Lloyd 17).

The second way in which I will employ the expression is in terms of the ways in which a person is considered to be nationally significant. Often, when people attain this status, they also attain a new kind of “national” identity. This is certainly true of Charles Haughey, the former Taoiseach (Prime Minister) of Ireland, who, through “self-conscious myth-making”(O’Toole 98), not to mention downright theft, became the embodiment of the rags-to-riches dream. People’s willingness to believe in this dream, and the near permanence of this national status, can be seen in Irish people’s longstanding reluctance to condemn Haughey, despite his criminal tendencies. In Chapters Two and Three, I will argue that the spectacular success of the memoirs (*Angela’s Ashes* was successful worldwide, and *Are You Somebody?* largely in Ireland), renders the authors nationally significant, which impacts on their subsequent writings: McCourt’s sequel, *’Tis*, and O’Faolain’s “Afterwords”.

However, I am also concerned with the category of personal identity. In employing the designation “personal identity”, I am aware that the term does not refer to some absolute, independent entity. It could be argued that the idea of a purely personal space is Utopian, as what is personal is inevitably shaped by the social, and that the distinction between the public and the private is thus an indefinable one. The term “personal identity” is simply a useful one, to refer to that which incorporates the private, untranslatable, experiences which

constitute the relationship between our multiple “selves”, or what Spivak refers to as the “ontic”: “that which is lived so intimately that it is inaccessible to ontology” (Arnott 35). I am, in a sense, thus using the term “personal identity” as a form of catachresis, in the sense which Spivak elaborates – deliberately employing an “inaccurate *yet necessary*” term (*ibid*).

As such, personal identity can be seen as something discrete from one’s public, or national, identity. Lloyd has argued: “The identity of the individual, his integrity, is expressed by the degree to which that individual identifies himself with and integrates his differences in a national consciousness” (15). However, I would disagree with this point, as this construction conflates the individual and the collective. The extent to which there are overlaps between the individual and the collective will be explored throughout this thesis, but the fact remains that the two forms of identity can be most usefully regarded as discrete.

The philosophy of Derek Parfit is valuable here in introducing a functionally applicable theoretical construction of personal identity. If personal identity can be understood as that which makes one the same person over time, then Parfit has argued that one’s personal identity is composed of “the psychological connectedness and/or continuity” (which he dubs Relationship R) between many, successive “selves” (215). It is this relationship which is the cohesive factor in identity formation. One’s “selves”, therefore, are informed by the public world, yet the relationship between one’s respective “selves”, in other words, what makes you “you”, is immutably private, and untranslatable.

When one speaks of Irish identity, a number of pictures tend to spring readily to mind. Many

of these renderings are based on configurations of the “Paddy” of Irish jokes. Stereotypes of Irish identity were cultivated by the Imperial powers who “othered” the Irish in much the same way as Orientals and Africans were “othered”, as many post-colonial critics (most notably Edward Said) have discussed. Evidence of this racism can be seen in cartoons of the time in magazines like *Punch*, *Puck*, and *Harper’s Weekly*. The Irish subject of such cartoons was simianised, vulgarised, bestialised, and made excessively hirsute, porcine and violent (Chang 38-39). Irish people were stereotyped as “Stage-Irishmen”: “garrulous, boastful, unreliable, hard-drinking, belligerent (though cowardly), and chronically impecunious. . . . with the Hiberno-English dialect or brogue and a concomitant propensity for illogical utterance” (*Oxford Companion* 533). What is interesting is the way in which Irish people themselves adapted and adopted some aspects of these identities in the nationalist struggle, and continue to do so in a “post-colonial” world. In exploring evidence of this, I will be using as a springboard one of the emphases in post-colonial theory, which is that non-reflexive nationalist movements (or perhaps the first steps in any nationalist movement) which adopt the colonial binaries upon which the colonial order was based, even while trying to inflect them positively, are bound to lack ultimate usefulness. In very different ways and contexts, this point has been made by, amongst others: Frantz Fanon, Abiola Irele, Kwame Anthony Appiah, and Chinua Achebe.

In this introductory chapter, I will show how Yeats stereotyped Irish characteristics, while remaining self-reflexively aware of the mythical yet pragmatic nature of his construction of Irish national identity. As parallel explanation to this, I will expound on the metaphor of evolution, which I will use both as a central organising trope in the thesis, and as an

allegorical image through which to illustrate my central point, which is that some contemporary Irish literature, in particular Nuala O'Faolain's memoir, shows an imaginative response to the unparalleled issues facing national identity in today's globalised world. This is in contrast with Frank McCourt's memoir which employs certain stereotypes in its narrative to act as "signals" of belonging.

The metaphor of evolution will be a central one in this dissertation, and will work on two levels. On one level, the concept of evolution mirrors the shift in thought about national identity which this dissertation hopes to trace. On the other level, I will show how the gradual change from colonial to post-colonial Irish nationalist thought reveals a progressive development in epistemology which is akin to biological evolution, where redundant genes (/world-views) become obsolete and extinct. This assertion bears further explanation.

Darwin's theory of evolution can be crudely summarised as saying that when the context in which organisms find themselves change, so too must the organism change in order to survive most efficiently. Those organisms which do not adapt to the altered context are liable to become extinct. The link has been drawn between this strictly biological sense of evolution and the idea of cultural or social evolution, where Darwin's arguments are extrapolated and applied not just to genetic modifications, but cultural and social changes inspired by contextual changes. So, the shift towards liberalism, or at the very least, acceptance of other cultures by many white South Africans after 1990, can be seen as a context-specific "survival strategy" whereby the appropriate shift in attitude was more or less required by the context for "easy" (conflict free) survival, in much the same way as the

increasing desertification of the world in the pre-Jurassic age saw a proliferation of reptiles which were biologically suited for such climates. Those South Africans who could not endure such a shift in their social values tended to resolve the conflict by placing themselves in a different context.

Change, as the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus noted, is the only constant in life. What interests me are the political and consequent social changes wrought respectively by Ireland's "colonisation" by the British², the nationalist upsurge at the turn of the twentieth century which arguably led to political independence, and the current global economic changes which are so affecting European, and thus Irish, national identities. It is the last of these three "contextual shifts" which is of particular concern in this dissertation. The fact that such social and political changes influence and shape Irish cultural continuity is evidenced by Daniel Corkery's life-long interest in "problems of cultural continuity in changing times", as explored in his books: *The Threshold of the Quiet* (1917) and *The Stormy Hills* (1929) (*Oxford Companion* 115). Christina Mahony, speaking about contemporary Irish drama, claims that certain playwrights seem "to be acutely aware of the Irish need for continual re-assessment" (17). Similarly, in attempting to find some relationship between transformation and continuity in Ireland, Robert Welch argues: "Change and stasis continually re-create one another" (7). Towards the end of this chapter, I will briefly outline some of the recent manifestation of "change and stasis" in Ireland, an understanding of which is crucial for my later explication of the two memoirs.

Mention the words "social" and "evolution" in the same sentence and eyebrows are

automatically raised. The concept of “evolution” is often taken to imply that things are getting better, in an essentialist sense. So, for instance, the increasing mental sophistication of the primates supposedly reaches its zenith in humans – and humans (unsurprisingly) accord themselves credit for being the “best” that evolution has so far produced. This argument has infamously been further broken down into what is, somewhat erroneously, termed “social Darwinism”³. Social Darwinism is, of course, the basis of racist biological and social studies, like eugenics. These studies aim to show that certain groups (such as blacks or Jews) are genetically and thus evolutionarily “inferior” to Europeans. This links most obviously to the supposed ethical justification of the colonial project, whereby the Imperial rationalisation for “commandeering” and ruling whole tracts of land was supposedly that the indigenes were incapable of doing so “adequately” themselves (inevitably a viciously self-fulfilling prophecy, as the Irish Great Famine (*Oxford Companion* 180) and the South African “Homeland” situation testify). Indeed, Hirsch shows how the negative interpretation of “Social Darwinism” has been used on the Irish, when Charles Kingsley described Irish people as “white chimpanzees” (Hirsch 1119).

However, the very assumption upon which “Social Darwinism” and eugenics is based – that evolution involves an intrinsically, qualitatively improving trajectory – is seriously flawed. If anything, the evidence seems to point to the contrary. The most “successful” species (in survival, hence evolutionary terms) are not the more complex species, but the simpler ones like unicellular amoebae, or algae, bacteria and viruses.

Nature seems to be destabilising essentialist notions of an “intrinsically better species” by

showing, in a Wittgensteinian and postmodern way, how meaning can differ from context to context. So, while our human brains enable us to use language with amazing complexity, we cannot survive alone in the ocean for very long. Yet bacteria are infinitely more successful at surviving in a multitude of contexts. Recently, the well-known evolutionist and entomologist Edward O. Wilson posed the question: “Can a bird fly better than a fish can swim?” (Wilson 27), which implies that one simply cannot qualitatively compare the manner in which two such diverse species transport themselves. This obviously deconstructs the notion of “the best” mode of transport.

The point I am trying to make, following Wilson, Ruse and others, is that evolution does not necessarily imply a qualitative improvement, but that the term “improvement” is made meaningful only in relation to its context. This provides a heuristic paradigm in which to evaluate, aesthetically and politically, the evolving body of Irish literature, especially when considering what purpose it serves, what needs it meets, and what its agendas may be.

The texts I will be looking at are grouped in part according to the way in which they fulfil these criteria. Accordingly, I will critique *Angela's Ashes* in Chapter Two before moving on to explore *Are You Somebody?*. My reasons for choosing these “popular” texts will be discussed below. In relating these works almost antithetically in this way, I hope not to be too reductive, although Chapter Four will conclude by comparing and contrasting the two memoirs. Furthermore, I hope that in speaking of Irish identity as such I will, again, not be as reductive as I will argue the colonial and nationalist movements were in constructing Irish national identity.

There is, of course, an undeniable ethical dimension to evolution *per se* and its use as a metaphor. The former, which has to do with how we develop our moral codes and how this affects the way we value them⁴, shall not concern us here, but the latter is of vital importance. Welch has examined the “interplay between stasis and change” which he says is “something to which Irish culture has been and is highly attuned” (10). For Welch, the guiding impetus behind this interplay is an evolutionary one, in both the metaphoric and literal senses. Welch extrapolates from George Bernard Shaw’s musings on the will which Shaw believes predicates evolution (so for example a fish wills to go on land and so develops legs). “This,” says Welch, “could equally be applied to culture and its evolution and transformations. If a culture cannot make the adaptation that necessity demands, then it will die and probably deserves to die, in that it has not answered life’s call” (4). This assertion echoes colonial thought and is both epistemologically and morally problematic, but is nonetheless a useful one when used against the grain as an analytical tool.

Epistemologically, loading “life’s call” with set values and requirements is antithetical to the point argued above, which is that only contextual human judgements carry values.

Furthermore, it commits what Hume described as the “naturalistic” fallacy by shifting from a descriptive statement (“the culture will die”) to a prescriptive statement (“it deserves to die”), without clearly indicating how the prescription gains its moral authority from the description. Morally, the statement ignores, or (even worse) attempts to justify, the epistemic and physical violence inherent in such human contextual changes, for example as incurred by the shift from an autochthonous to a modern and colonised state of being.

Welch's formulation is an interesting echo of colonial thought. As Said argues in *Culture and Imperialism*, it is a well-known fact that the colonial powers believed their role in life was superior to that of the colonised (xi-xii), and so felt justified in enforcing the contextual change that often necessitated cultural mutation or extinction. Indeed, the colonial project in Ireland was certainly partially epistemologically rationalised by the manner in which the Irish personality was reductively caricatured and despised. Evaluating literature in a post-colonial aesthetic, which involves moral suppositions based on the ethical tenets of a liberal democracy which recognise the basic integrity of all people and their attendant right to respectful treatment, indubitably necessitates a questioning of such (colonial) identity formulations. Nevertheless, despite this connection to colonial thought, Welch's understanding of the undeniable functionality of culture is useful. I do not wish to agree with him that those cultures which become unable to fulfil certain functions deserve to be obliterated, as this is grossly unfair to minorities, and is not conducive to the preservation of historical aesthetics. Yet the primary assumption – that art serves a contextual purpose – is one which I shall employ in my analysis of the texts to be studied.

If one wishes to examine the evolutionary change in nationalist identity, and its interplay with personal identity, some attention deserves to be given to the evolutionary roots of contemporary Irish epistemologies, which are undoubtedly still informed (oppositionally or not) by the colonial mindset outlined above.

There is probably no better example to look at in analysing nationalist "evolutionary roots" than W.B. Yeats. Not only did he consciously champion Irish cultural nationalism, but he,

unlike many Irish writers now commonly assumed to be English (Oscar Wilde, George Bernard Shaw, Iris Murdoch and so on), dwells still in the popular imagination as a kind of iconic Irish bard, mystical and emotional in a “typically” Irish way. Of course, Yeats is far from “typical” of Irish people (if that concept of typicality has any meaning – Nuala O’Faolain certainly questions it (vii)). Yeats came from a landed Protestant family, which was substantially richer than the vast majority of the Catholic peasants he so valorised in his poems.

Yeats was one of the leading figures, along with Douglas Hyde and Lady Gregory, involved in the collection and publication of traditional folk and fairy tales, which initiated the Literary Revival (Yeats published *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* in 1888, and *The Celtic Twilight* in 1902; while Douglas Hyde published a similar book, *Beside the Fire*, in the year officially designated as the beginning of the Revival, 1890). In turning to Gaelic matter for inspiration, Yeats intended to “deepen the political passion of the nation that all, artist and poet, craftsman and day-labourer would accept a common design” (Yeats in Lloyd 71).

James Wood remarks in his review of R.F. Foster’s *W.B. Yeats: A Life*, that the book shows “how Yeats went about building modern Irish literature in Dublin and in London at the end of the 19th century, and how Irish goblins and fairies were foot soldiers in that campaign” (Wood). Drawing a link between this campaign and the metaphor of evolution, Welch claims that “Yeats arrived and opened up the interplay between stasis and change. Yeats promoted changes by seeking radical continuity, and in searching for that he was venturing into areas of experience, folklore, and so on with a freshness of address not hitherto seen” (Welch 8).

The Literary Revival is generally seen as a crucial factor in inspiring a cultural nationalism which informed the political nationalism which led eventually (in 1922⁵) to the establishment of the Irish Free State⁶. Daniel Corkery believes that the “revival had not produced a ‘normal’ – still less a ‘national’ literature – because it was created by those who were essentially expatriates, writing for readers other than the Irish people” (*Oxford Companion* 115)⁷. Regardless, the romanticised picture of an imaginary “simple but wise” nation which Yeats was inspired by, certainly captured the public imagination, as Yeats’s formulations are to be seen in transmuted forms in Irish art from his time onwards. It is argued that Yeats set a standard to which subsequent Irish writers would, in one way or another, be compared or compare themselves. As Hirsch says: “every Irish writer since Yeats has had to contend with his revisionary portrait” (Hirsch 1126). This fact illustrates the national importance of the Literary Revival.

Yeats’s conception of nationalism included an admiration for the Irish people, and a romanticisation of the place itself:

I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree
 And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made:
 Nine bean rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee,
 And live alone in the bee-loud glade. (“The Lake Isle of Innisfree” 1-4)

Innisfree can be found in the West of Ireland, in County Sligo, and Yeats’s romanticising of place is particularly focussed on the West of Ireland, which even now is still fairly rural. The influential effect of such a nineteenth century rendering of Ireland is seen in the twentieth century, in works like the Jim Sheridan screenplay for *Into the West*, where the West becomes

a conflation of American-style mythological Wild West and the place where Gaelic mythology comes to life. With reference to the latter, the film explicitly revolves around the legend of Tír na nÓg (the Land of Youth), a legend linked to those collected in *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* and seen in poems like “A Faery Song”. As one reviewer says: “*Into the West* juxtaposes the mundane modernism represented by the city with the mythical wonder of the Old Ireland” (“Review: Into the West”).

Yeats’s romanticising of simple peasant existence reminds one of Wordsworth, particularly in the final stanza of the above poem:

I will arise and go now, for always night and day
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey,
I hear it in the deep heart’s core. (9-12)

The poet’s action, leading to evocative sensory stimulation, followed by an almost epiphanic moment of recollection puts one in mind of the form of Wordsworth’s “I wandered lonely as a cloud . . .”. Another link between Wordsworth and Yeats is Yeats’s use (as quoted in this chapter’s epigraph) of the famous beginning of Wordsworth’s 1799 *The Prelude*: “Was it for this”⁸ (1.1). This connection to Wordsworth again links Yeats to a tradition which is in fact more English than Irish⁹.

In fact, coming from the position of “outsider” might explain Yeats’ self-reflexivity, glimpsed formally in the poem, “When You Are Old”:

When you are old and grey and full of sleep,
And nodding by the fire, take down this book,

And slowly read, and dream of the soft look
 Your eyes had once, and of their shadows deep . . . (1-4)

There, the book (“this book”) one holds in one’s hands becomes an object made hauntingly connected to the poem itself. This poem is not the only example of such awareness, as the titles “Man and the Echo” and “A Dialogue of Self and Soul” imply. Yet Yeats’s self-reflexivity extends beyond the textual, or formal, to a political self-reflexivity. How this comes about merits some careful explanation.

Despite his upper-class (and Protestant/English)¹⁰ connections (exemplified by his long-standing friendship with the aristocratic Lady Gregory), Yeats was one of the most important proponents of the Irish Literary Revival, which was crucially important in providing the cultural impetus for the nationalist struggle against England. Indeed, Yeats was largely instrumental in creating a unified vision of Ireland, a romanticised and idyllic version of Ireland, in part by invoking mythological figures like Cathleen Ní Houlihan (Yeats wrote a play of this name) and Cú-Chulainn (as in the poem “Cuchulain Comforted”) to promote nationalist ideals. Yet as the variance in the spelling of Cú-Chulainn’s name implies¹¹, Yeats invoked figures of a tradition which was largely exotic, and thus fascinating to him, and which stemmed from a language he never mastered, and indeed in which he apparently delighted in fabricating his own spellings for the characters (Albright lxvii)¹². This may have been fairly practical, as Irish spelling is far from phonetic (the name Pádraig is pronounced “Porric”, Naimh is pronounced “Neve”, and so on), and so readers could more easily identify the names as spoken.

Yet Yeats's propensity for invention goes beyond spelling to a "quite arrogant indifference to the actual landscape" he describes in poems like "Coole and Ballylee, 1913", wherein he describes a river flowing into a lake at Coole Park, when it does no such thing (Lloyd 65). One is reminded of the colonial prejudice one finds in traditional world maps like the Mercator even today, with European countries and North America being made to seem disproportionately larger than they really are, as the Arno Peters map, which dates from the 1990s, shows (Peters). Maybe Yeats is merely using an extreme form of poetic licence and it is not fair to suggest that he is following colonial mindsets by re-figuring topography for his own epistemological purposes. If so, his reasons for doing so must be examined.

As Ernest Renan, Ernest Gellner and others have argued, national identity is constructed, in that appeals to a romanticised sense of place (as seen in "The Lake Isle of Innisfree"), mythical figures of national importance (like Cathleen Ní Houlihan and Cú-Chulainn), and a kindred, populist identity (as seen in Yeats's valorising of Irish peasantry and lifestyles in *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry*) construct a sense of homogeneous national identity, without which political nationalism would be impossible.

To a certain extent, Yeats was aware that he was "artificially" creating this identity, by means of such appeals. This awareness is seen in the 1914 poem "The Fisherman". The poem begins with Yeats visualising a "freckled man" in "grey Connemara clothes", thus through Yeats's describing the supposedly "Irish" freckled complexion, and drab west-country (rural) clothes, the reader sees the subject of the poem as emblematic of a race of people. We then see Yeats's desire to use this figure in his own project of writing "for my own race":

It's long since I began
 To call up to the eyes
 This wise and simple man.
 All day I'd looked in the face
 What I had hoped 'twould be
 To write for my own race . . . (6-11)

But the illusory nature of this Arcadian image, the romanticised fiction of a wise yet simple race, does not escape Yeats:

And the reality:
 The living men that I hate,
 The dead man that I loved,
 The craven man in his seat,
 The insolent unreproved . . . (12-16)

Yeats expresses here the disappointment he feels in the rise of the political nationalism inspired by the cultural nationalism he helped to create by the very romanticisation of figures like the Connemara fisherman. Going further, Yeats acknowledges that the fisherman is “A man who does not exist, / A man who is but a dream” (35-36). These ideas are also echoed in the epigraph to this chapter.

This fantastical man is not necessarily a product of Yeats's own imagination, but rather an attempted inversion of colonial stereotypes, which validates Lee's claim that nationalism is a “posture provoked by Imperialism” (659). Showing how Irish national identity is constructed in oppositional terms and giving support to Gellner's assertion that nationalism's “symbolism is drawn from the healthy, pristine, vigorous life of the peasants” (57), Edward Hirsch asserts:

The dehumanisation of the Irish in English periodicals (and on the stage) was fiercely challenged by the alternative tradition in Irish newspapers of portraying the peasant as a noble, honest, victimized farmer. No dramatisation or portrayal of Irish peasant life could ever be wholly free of the looming shadow and presence of the English colonizer. . . . By idealizing peasants – and by defining them as the essence of an ancient, dignified culture – the Revivalists were specifically countering the English stereotype. (1119-1120)

John Foster has argued that “although the Protestant Revivalists [whose most emblematic figure is Yeats] loved the peasant, they did so in part because he was seen as an aristocrat in disguise or in some way equivalent to an aristocrat”, and consequently, Foster continues, “Protestantism and high birth, nominally dropped as criteria for Irishness, were smuggled back into the Revival concept” (252), thus helping to create what Gellner calls a “local high” national culture (57). Certainly, Yeats ennobles the Connemara fisherman by not only describing him as “wise and simple” (8), but making him deserving of “one / Poem maybe as cold / And passionate as the dawn” (38-40). Because of arguments like the above, recent Catholic critics, following Corkery and Kavanagh, argue that “the apparent nationalism of the Revival . . . was in fact disguised unionism” (J. Foster 253).

Declan Kiberd would argue that the attempted inversion of colonial stereotypes is far from unprecedented. He compares the Irish situation to the post-colonial African one and considers the arguments of a theorist like Chinua Achebe, who argues that people in post-

colonial African states seized upon the very terms used by the colonial powers to oppress them, in order to build up a sense of national identity. They did this before realising that the “great collusive swindle that is independence” (Achebe’s words) is self-defeating because it remains trapped in the dualistic epistemologies of colonialism, and implicitly utilises that same value-system (Kiberd 554). As Abiola Irele has argued, this is bound to fail in generating a meaningful national identity (Irele 205)¹³. It seems significant that after having achieved independence in 1922, Irish people elected to institute their own forms of epistemic violence in the form of censorship. As Oliver St. John Gogarty put it, Ireland was on the brink of becoming a country where “we should make use of our recently won liberty to fill every village and hamlet with little literary pimps” who took pleasure in bringing about the banning of a book (Carlson 6-7).

Nonetheless, Yeats himself was not unaware of the tension inherent in positively inflecting colonial stereotypes in order to create a nationalist discourse, as I think my brief analysis of “The Fisherman”, and indeed the epigraph to this chapter, shows. Furthermore, these quotations seem to indicate that he came to understand both the contextual usefulness and the shortcomings of his early, overtly nationalist work which romanticised Ireland and the Irish. Following William Thomas, Norman Vance declares that Yeats “has become the supreme representative figure of the ‘colonist mentality’ [Thomas’s words], the embodiment of a circumscribed and hybridized national culture” (215). Obviously, the political context that thus “circumscribed” Yeats has shifted many times since then, and the evolving body of literature has succeeded in varying degrees in meeting the requirements of such contexts.

As Ireland's political situation changed, so did the context in which artists found themselves, and so, following the evolution analogy, their work altered from that of the past to suit the context. Much has been written about Seamus Heaney's work being rooted in the context of contemporary Ulster conflict, and his stance on the North. His "Bog" poetry has invoked ancient mythologies to offer potential solutions for contextual problems between Catholics and Protestants, calling for a "marriage" exemplified by the co-existent relationship between sacrificial victim and Earth Goddess, Nerthus. Neil Corcoran argues that in writing "The Tollund Man", Heaney is beginning to "discover, or to invent, that suggestive analogy between Glob's bog-bodies and the victims of Irish political violence which culminates in the extended mythologising of the 'bog poems' of *North*" (77). Another example of this mythologising can be seen in the poem "Nerthus", and this "imaginative connection" between Jutland and Ireland is motivated by Heaney's "sensing a kinship between these ancient sacrificial killings and [in Heaney's words] 'the tradition of Irish political martyrdom for that cause whose icon is Kathleen ni Houlihan'" (Corcoran 78). The figure of Cathleen Ní Houlihan links this argument once more to Yeats, who also engaged Irish mythologies for political ends, as discussed above, and both Yeats and Heaney have been accused of "essentialising" Irish identity to serve these political ends¹⁴.

However, I will leave Heaney aside in favour of contemporary, popular fiction. In comparison with poetry as rich and worthy of analysis as Seamus Heaney's, this focus may seem somewhat trivial. But if one is concerned with nationalism, one must return to manifestations of popular sentiment, or texts which capture the popular imagination in ways that poetry regrettably does not. In part, then, this thesis is in response to Bruce Stewart's criticism of Declan Kiberd's book *Inventing Ireland*: "little or no attempt is made to observe

just how Irish people actually use cultural forms or negotiate necessities, obsessions, and free choices in their lives today” (Stewart 6). Stewart admits that Kiberd does discuss Dermot Bolger, Roddy Doyle, Tom Murphy and a few others, but is right in asserting that his discussion of these authors is “cursory” (*ibid*).

Even before reading this criticism of Kiberd’s work, I felt that much of the most interesting, and ambivalent (because not necessarily theoretically self-conscious) evidence of national and personal identity was to be found in the contemporary Irish literature which has recently captured the imagination of the Irish public¹⁵. The works of Nuala O’Faolain and Frank McCourt express thoughts on national identity which seem to be, to use Appiah’s word, “natural”, in that they are not pre-formulated or theoretically cohesive. In this way, the above authors’ work differs from the work of Joyce, who attempts consciously to show, in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, how Stephen Dedalus can escape from nationality, family and religion¹⁶. Yeats’s work is also self-conscious (although in a completely opposite way), as I have explored above. I am not trying to claim that this renders Yeats’s and Joyce’s work *inauthentic*, (although calling the contemporary work uncontrived and contrasting it with Joyce and Yeats might imply this), but it is undeniably more epistemologically formulated and politically self-conscious than the work of the contemporary writers under scrutiny in this work. Colm Tóibín’s work may share these traits with that of Yeats and Joyce, as exemplified by Tóibín’s self-conscious attempt to portray an Irish culture characterised by “fracture and absence” in *The Blackwater Lightship* (Scurr 21), so I do not wish to imply that *all* contemporary Irish literature lacks the political self-reflexivity of Yeats and Joyce¹⁷.

To return to the analogy of evolution, the contemporary work being studied in this thesis is written in a considerably different social context from that in which Yeats wrote his overtly nationalist work (as *The Blackwater Lightship*'s preoccupation with HIV/AIDS indicates). Not only has the Republic of Ireland been politically independent for 79 years, but the social and economic milieu of Ireland in the 1990s is quite unlike the atmosphere in this country at any other stage in its existence. The change which has had the most far-reaching effects is the economic boom Ireland has been experiencing since the early 1990s, which shows no sign of abating yet, and which has led to the Irish economy being popularly dubbed "The Celtic Tiger". In a article which expresses a nostalgia for the "old", poor Ireland, where "only Italian restaurants served pasta", Catherine Donnelly lambastes the "new" Ireland for its materialism, smugness and predictable embracing of certain conventions:

Dublin is so cool. We're so chic, so clever. We can't wipe the smile off our faces. . . . We're winners. . . . And, if we're great hosts, we're even better visitors. Other countries have soccer hooligans. Ireland hugs its opponents to death. (28)

Yet, as the tone of her article suggests, Donnelly is being confrontational, and her point of view is seemingly overridden by the majority of Irish people who revel in the economic stability and materialism of the "new" Ireland. Making a sharp break with its history of hunger and economic depression, the "new" Ireland is inspiring a fresh kind of confidence (Donnelly might say arrogance) in Irish people, as a recent survey by the London *Sunday Times* indicates ("The New Grown-Ups").

Robert Welch has claimed that a “technical and emotional problem for the artist is getting the right angle on his material. If it’s a botched stroke then the stone will split all kinds of ways revealing sheets of useless contours, interesting maybe, but distracting” (Welch 241). What I find interesting about literature is precisely those interesting, unintentionally-revealed contours. So, it is fascinating to look at that which contributes, though not explicitly, to Irish cultural nationalism, especially at a time in which Ireland is so changed and all things “Irish” are received by the world with great interest: witness, for example, the huge international success of *Angela’s Ashes* (both the written version and the film), and the interest in the sequel, *’Tis*. In fact, despite more moderate expectations, in the years 1996-1997, *Angela’s Ashes* sold a phenomenal 2 027 718 hardcover copies (“Top Bestsellers Archives”), and has been translated into more than 20 languages (Shulevitz). W.J. McCormack cynically sees this revival of interest in Irish literature as a kind of “advanced tourism” (Longley 1233), while John Ardagh regards it as a result of the “cultural export drive” started by the exportation of its scholar monks, folk musicians and writers (235). Whatever its economic, political or cultural reasons, such a climate of interest makes this study timely and useful. In the next chapter, I will turn to look at some reasons for the popularity of McCourt’s work.

Notes

1. Kiberd's important review of modern Irish literature is tellingly called *Inventing Ireland*.
2. I put this in inverted commas because it should be noted that Ireland was never *officially* a colony of Britain. Officially, Ireland was a part of the "British Isles", represented in Westminster, and so not the separate entity ruled by Britain that colonies were. However, to all intents and purposes, and to borrow a phrase of Spivak's, the "epistemic violence" ("Can the Subaltern Speak?" 281) of the British Imperialists, whose presence was tellingly resented, constitutes a form of colonial rule. This rule arguably began in 1210, with King John's second visit to Ireland during which Irish kings showed submission, although the so-called "Poynings' Law" in 1494 officially bound Irish Parliament to English governance (*Oxford Companion* xix).
3. The term is erroneous because Darwinist evolutionary theory itself is clearly not infused with nor logically reliant upon the value judgements we commonly assume are implied by the word "evolution". Darwin's high respect for the earthworm should in itself be evidence of this (Kermode 7). Having said this, Darwin did claim: "of all the differences between man and the lower animals, the moral sense or conscience is by far the most important. This sense . . . has a rightful supremacy" (Darwin 97), which clearly implies the existence of a world ordered and categorised according to intrinsic merit. Resisting the claim that evolution implies essential progress, Michael Ruse argues:

Progress implies getting better or truer in some way: yet much of the history of life belies this claim. Consider the reptiles. Today's representatives are piddling little creatures compared to the dinosaurs, which were neither so clumsy nor so gormless as popular myth would have it. Of course, you might want to argue that warm-bloodedness or a large brain is the sign of progress. But the nasty suspicion arises that you are reading into the fossil record your own idea of progress, which you then triumphantly extract. (13)

4. This is not to imply that the process of evolution is ethical, in itself (which is simply a normative claim), but that the very mechanisms upon which we rely to make ethical judgements are themselves a product of evolution, and thus not necessarily informed by the objective moral norms we assume are the backbone of ethical reasoning (which is, more interestingly, a meta-ethical claim) (Ruse 207-272).

5. Significantly, 1922 is the year officially given as denoting the end of the supposedly nationalist Literary Revival, and is the year which saw the publication of *Ulysses*, which “attacks many of [the Revival’s] main figures: Russell for spiritual formlessness; Hyde and Padraic Colum for stodgy Celticism; Oliver St John Gogarty for moral complacency, and nationalism itself, in the person of the Citizen . . . for intolerance and hatred” (*Oxford Companion* 313).

6. The connection between cultural nationalism and political nationalism has been explored by Lloyd, who contends that the economic impediments in Ireland caused by colonialism made for an absence of representative “labour” individuals from whom to

abstract an iconic identity, so culture became crucial to nationalism: “Quite simply, culture is endowed with the task of forming citizens in the absence of the economic and political-institutional conditions for their emergence” (148). Interestingly, in “Man and the Echo”, Yeats himself speculates as to whether his play *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* “sen[t] out / Certain men the English shot” (11-12).

7. Seamus Deane comments on Yeats’s “imagined audience” (the phrase bringing Benedict Anderson to mind), saying that “even as the actual audience fades into disrepute [through lack of interest or downright hostility], the ideal audience within his poems – legendary and historic figures, personal friends – becomes more enhanced, more contrastingly dignified” (“The Poet’s Dream” 235). This seems to add credence to Corkery’s point.

8. Just as Wordsworth’s *Prelude* refers to figures and myths of the Classical tradition (for example the “Æolian cave” in the 1850 version, 7.533), so too does Yeats refer to the Classical tradition: “The Municipal Gallery Revisited” refers to “everything Antaeus-like” (6.5). This reflexivity of Yeats implicitly referring to Wordsworth, Wordsworth referring to the Classical tradition, and Yeats referring to the Classical tradition suggests a continuity between cultures which is seldom rendered explicit in the discourse of cultural nationalism.

9. Lloyd’s consideration of the transformations in Irish street ballads leads him to draw a link between Wordsworth and the Young Ireland movement (which was nationalistic, but to which Yeats did not belong):

The cultural nationalism developed within the Young Ireland movement was

quite strictly a *Romantic* nationalism and, like its unionist counterparts, derived much from English and German high Romanticism. But the forces that a poet like Wordsworth seeks to counteract . . . are accentuated in the Irish case by the colonial encounter that both accelerates the processes of cultural disintegration and gives a specific political name, anglicization, to the phenomenon of “reduction to identity”. (Lloyd 96)

10. It could be argued that these terms are, in a situation peculiar to Ireland, somewhat mutually permeable. Much of this has to do with Ulster, and the now immutable politicisation of what are essentially religious terms. So, claiming to be Protestant or Catholic in Ulster is taken to say more about one’s politics and national affiliations than it does about one’s spiritual faith (Foster 248-261 and Watson).

11. While Yeats, McCourt, Kiberd, and others have used the spelling “Cuchulain”, reference books like *The Oxford Companion to Irish Literature* spell it “Cú Chulainn”. The *Irish-English Dictionary* suggests yet another spelling, “Cú-Chulainn”, as a hyphen should apparently be used “between the two parts of a compound word when . . . two similar consonants come together” (“Rules and Conventions” 4), as it is with “cù-chaorach”, or sheepdog. I have chosen to use the latter version throughout my dissertation, except when quoting directly.

12. The artificiality of Yeats’s promulgation of this material is ironically indicated by the fact that, while collecting material on field trips in the West with Lady Gregory, Yeats “had difficulty understanding the thick Irish accents of the peasants. The incomprehension was

mutual” (Wood).

13. A similar point is given an interesting angle by the Northern Irish Protestant academic John Wilson Foster, who argues that Imperial epistemological hangovers lead Ulster Protestants to think of themselves as British when in fact they are not, and this makes problematic the Ulster Protestant’s finding “the central locus of his values”, a problem which is “rooted in some species of colonialism or postcolonialism” (267).

14. Yeats has been accused of this by Gregory Schirmer, who argues that “Yeats’s rewriting of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy into an idealized cultural aristocracy . . . may be seen as an attempt to shore himself up against the ruin that seems always to threaten his romantic idealism” (277). Heaney has been accused of this essentialising by David Lloyd, who claims that Heaney uses a “rigid, dualistic schematicisation” (26), although Foster has argued to the contrary that “never does Heaney simplify, much less caricature Catholic Ulster, and rightly so” (276).

15. I am reminded of Anthony Appiah’s words: “[t]he problem, of course, is that group identity seems to work only – or, at least to work best – when it is seen by its members as natural, as ‘real’” (284). Indeed, the “attendant mystifications” which Appiah argues are necessary for the creation of this sense of reality are precisely what Yeats tries to cultivate.

16. The inescapable and pervasive nature of nationalist feelings may be seen in the fact that, despite Joyce’s apparent aversion to nationalism, he does resort to nationalist thinking. John Foster has argued that Catholicism is a mark of “indissoluble Irishness” (250) and Joyce

would seem to agree. Even though Joyce was a lapsed Catholic, he told James Stephens that Stephens “could not understand the Irish since he wasn’t Catholic” (Foster 256).

17. However, Edna Longley has argued that there is a deficit of literary criticism (and a surfeit of literature) in Ireland: “Irish professors write poems more often than poets develop critical ideologies” (Longley 1233), which would seem to imply that self-reflexivity is the less common of writing styles.

Chapter Two

There's No Place Like Home

It is particularly true of Irish culture that the imagination itself is inextricable from the idea of home, usually made powerful by the act of leaving it In the network of recollection and imagination – remembering the past and inventing the future – that makes a culture, there's no place like home.
(O'Toole 167)

Frank McCourt's contribution to the body of Irish-American works, *Angela's Ashes*, imaginatively explores the idea of home – Ireland – a theme which is continued in the sequel, *'Tis*. As a memoir, *Angela's Ashes* entails remembering, and as a piece of literature, it necessitates the use of creativity; thus, McCourt is enmeshed in what the Irish journalist Fintan O'Toole calls the “network of recollection and imagination”.

It is significant that *Angela's Ashes* ends with the realisation of McCourt's dream of leaving Ireland and returning to the country of his birth – America – and that *'Tis* picks up the narrative from there, arguably (to follow O'Toole) making the act of leaving Ireland that which crystallises his sense of “home” into a more powerful one. Furthermore, *Angela's Ashes* was written in America decades after McCourt had left Ireland and so is an instance of the memoirist re-inventing his idea of “home” from abroad.

Yet if McCourt can be read as saying: “There's no place like home”, it is not said with

Dorothy's bright-eyed desire to be whisked back to Kansas. "Home", for McCourt, is inimitable, certainly, yet this singularity is not presented as being in Ireland's favour.

McCourt would have the reader believe that the place he calls home, the Ireland of *Angela's Ashes*, and in particular the lower-class lanes of Limerick, offers a kind of miserable existence which cannot be matched anywhere else.

Nonetheless, for McCourt, Ireland was "home". He says that the "strange thing" was that he "came from this absolutely miserable childhood," yet when he eventually came to live in America, he felt "nostalgic for Limerick" ("Learning" 72). McCourt's nostalgia is thus not dissimilar to the feelings his father has for Ireland, as seen when the father gets drunk and sings nationalist songs and makes his children swear to die for Ireland (an incident which recurs throughout the book). For all the misery in *Angela's Ashes*, McCourt's nostalgia for Ireland is disseminated by means of his portrayal of the flawed but lovable Limerick characters, and the inherent wit of the people, which permeates the book.

The humour in *Angela's Ashes* is a kind of tongue-in-cheek way of deliberately over-dramatising the pain of the poverty and hunger and emotional deprivation suffered by McCourt and his brothers. Nevertheless, the instances of such over-dramatization are so frequent – in fact, they constitute the body of the book – that one realises that there is a core of McCourt which believes the melodramatic version of events to be the most accurate record. This belief leads McCourt to begin his memoir by sincerely claiming, before the humorous or ironic tone has been established: "My father and mother should have stayed in New York where they met and married and I was born" (1). The use of the phrase "should

have” is telling because it sets the tone for the remainder of the book – a tone of wistful longing for better days (which probably never were, or never would be).

For all his use of irony and humour in the book, McCourt’s sincere belief that his childhood was impaired by his poor, Irish upbringing, is exposed in an interview with Jim Saah, where McCourt claims that the “desperate situation” he was in “had a very damaging effect. The poverty and the influence of the church were very damaging. It damaged all of us emotionally” (“UNo MAS” 4). The repetition of the word “damage”, and the very American fixation with the idea that emotional abuse during childhood irrevocably and severely scars one, seem to reveal McCourt’s sincere belief that his memoir, wretched as it is, is a tale of the worst kind of childhood. I am not trying to deny that McCourt’s childhood was heart-rending, even if there is a degree of exaggeration in the book. Furthermore, I am not trying to deny the use of irony and humour in the book. However, McCourt’s use of humour is ambiguous (as humour almost always is), for there is a subtext of too much self-pity for him to be really making fun of his childhood. It consequently seems fitting that the memoir is named after a sorrowful artefact – the ashes of his mother.

McCourt proudly cites a reader who was amazed that he (Mccourt) could live such a miserable existence and yet not show any self pity (“Learning” 79-80). So it seems unlikely that McCourt would see his work as revealing self-pity. Chiefly, he justifies the occasionally maudlin tone of the book by reference to the extraordinary poverty he is said to have suffered. With that poverty came misery and abuse, not least from his Christian Brother schoolmasters. McCourt’s graphic depiction of the abject poverty he and his family were said to have

suffered is one of the reasons the book has been criticised. Richard Harris, controversial as he himself is, has lambasted *Angela's Ashes*, calling it “soulless, humourless and flagrant rubbish” (Harris). Harris reputedly knew the McCourt family in the 1950s, and believes McCourt to be “an unreliable chronicler of past events” (*ibid*). The reasons why McCourt might (possibly) have embellished the actuality of his life will be explored below as well as in the fourth chapter, which will compare and contrast O’Faolain’s and McCourt’s memoirs.

One of the first things to strike me when reading the book was that, despite the very first sentence expressing a longing to have stayed in America and to not have grown up in Ireland, McCourt sees himself as typically Irish. As I have already noted, he feels he is writing about “*the* [generic] miserable Irish Catholic childhood” (1: emphasis added). Significantly, McCourt has preserved one of the most striking signifiers of his being Irish, because, despite living in America for nearly half a century, he has purportedly retained his Limerick accent (Tosh 2), which makes people say to him: “Oh, you’re Irish” (“Nuala O’Faolain and Frank McCourt . . .” 4). Furthermore, commentary about McCourt, and interviews conducted with him, suggest that he is regarded by many as being Irish, not American. For instance, one interviewer says of McCourt that he displays typical Irish characteristics (“UNo MAS” 1); a reviewer claims that *Angela's Ashes* is full of “Irish wit and pathos (“Barnes and Noble.com - Angela’s Ashes . . .”); while another person indignantly asks why Frank McCourt and Nuala O’Faolain are compared at all, asking: “Is it just because they’re both Irish?” (“Amazon.com: buying info: Are You . . .”).

Yet McCourt has spent more years of his life living in the country of his birth – America – than in Ireland, having left Ireland at the age of 19, and now being in his late 60s. Nuala O’Faolain points this out in a conversation with Frank McCourt. He says that he could not talk to girls in America because he “came from Limerick”. In response, O’Faolain says: “But the thing about you, Frank, is that you don’t really come from Limerick. You were an outsider in the first place.” To this claim, McCourt meekly agrees, “I was” (“Nuala O’Faolain and Frank McCourt . . .” 3-4).

What then, I asked myself, makes him feel so typically Irish? How is it that *Angela’s Ashes* has become emblematic of so many Irish people’s lives? What narrative strategies does McCourt use in this account of his personal identity to establish his national identity, if this identity is not dependent on birth, or time spent in a country? These are the questions which I will address in this chapter. In doing so, I will work through the text in a roughly sequential manner, interspersing a narrative account of the text with analysis.

After the first sentence of the book, McCourt continues: “Instead, they returned to Ireland when I was four, my brother, Malachy, three, the twins, Oliver and Eugene, barely one, and my sister, Margaret, dead and gone” (1). There are two interesting things to note about this sentence. Firstly, the use of the phrase “dead and gone” smacks of a raconteur memoirist manipulating the reader’s sympathy by tugging at our heartstrings, yet also harks back to the Irish literary precedent of Yeats: “Romantic Ireland’s dead and gone” (“September 1913” 7)¹. Secondly, the purpose of naming the children and their ages so soon in the text seems to be to establish that the McCourts fitted into a “typically” Irish, Catholic pattern: many children

separated by a narrow age gap, with a proportion bound to die. This is the pattern which ground Nuala O’Faolain’s mother down, and one which is explored in much Irish literature – another recent example being the life of Mrs Star, mother of Henry, the protagonist of the newly-begun trilogy from Roddy Doyle. In the first of the series (the rest are as yet unpublished), one discovers that Henry is a “replacement”, a namesake of his mother’s deceased first-born².

To return to *Angela’s Ashes*, the very next paragraph is a good example of the humorous use of over-dramatisation in the memoir:

When I look back on my childhood I wonder how I survived at all. It was, of course, a miserable childhood: the happy childhood is hardly worth your while. Worse than the ordinary miserable childhood is the miserable Irish childhood, and worse yet is the miserable Irish Catholic childhood.

People everywhere brag and whimper about the woes of their early years, but nothing can compare with the Irish version: the poverty; the shiftless loquacious alcoholic father; the pious defeated mother moaning by the fire; pompous priests; bullying schoolmasters; the English and the terrible things they did to us for eight hundred long years. (1)

On first reading, this passage may seem like a clever use of irony. However, doubts have been expressed that this is a pure use of ironic humour (Harris), the implication being that McCourt truly believes himself to have lived the most miserable childhood. One reviewer, speaking of this passage, claims that: “Cliche is invoked on the very first page of *Angela’s*

Ashes, in a way that apparently promises subversion. . . . But what we hear is exactly what we get” (R.F. Foster 1-2). The interpellative “of course” indicates a sense of ironic distancing and humour, but the use of this phrase may simply be a narrative device to introduce the speaker’s voice which is so crucial to the interest of the memoir³.

The content of the book supports the claims made by Harris and R.F. Foster. Indicating that the previously-quoted passage is, to a large extent, intended to be taken seriously, the book does revolve around the poverty of Limerick and the caricatures McCourt mentions in the passage. One of the central characters is McCourt’s “shiftless loquacious alcoholic father”, the other is Angela – “the pious defeated mother moaning by the fire”. The book is full of “pompous priests” (like Stephen Carey (167)), and “bullying headmasters” (like Mr. O’Halloran (235)), not to mention many references to “the English and the terrible things they did to us for eight hundred long years”⁴. One of the heartless acts which is mentioned is the English’s eviction of Irish people who could not eat, let alone pay rent during the Famine (322). The use of the word “long” here, like use of the phrase “dead and gone” earlier, is tautological, and is an instance of McCourt milking sympathy and indignation from the reader.

When McCourt claims that “nothing can compare with the Irish version” of unhappy childhood, he is making a universalising statement, and over-generalisations are an integral part of humour and irony. However, evidence in support of the fact that McCourt truly believes himself to have suffered the “worst kind of childhood” is borne out throughout the book, not only by the content *per se*, but rather by a lack of reference to those much more

poverty-stricken, brutal, and horrific childhoods, as lived in such places as Sierra Leone, Bosnia, and Rwanda. One might, of course, ask whether it is fair to make this criticism of *Angela's Ashes*. After all, a memoir is a subjective account based only on a specific time-frame in one person's life (Zinsser 3), and so McCourt cannot be said to have undertaken the task of describing miserable childhoods in Rwanda. Nonetheless, it is the claim that "nothing can compare to the Irish version" of the miserable childhood which seems to add validity to my criticism. As far as the use of irony goes, this claim is neither amusing nor clever, and while it might be coated in a veneer of irony, I believe it reveals a self-pitying attitude which we see reinforced in the body of the memoir.

For instance, while it is true that there are poorer Limerick boys than McCourt, the narrative is structured to make one ultimately feel more pity for McCourt than any other boy. One example of a boy who is poorer than Frank McCourt is Paddy Clohessy, who has a shaved head (to prevent lice infestations) and "no shoe to his foot", unlike McCourt (132). The family is so poor because Paddy's father is afflicted with tuberculosis. It turns out, in fact, that Angela and Paddy's father had been sweethearts in Limerick, before she left for America and married Malachy. Throughout the book, one might well be inclined to feel even more sorry for Paddy than for McCourt, yet ultimately, Paddy's father pulls himself off what was believed to be his deathbed, goes to England, makes money which he sends home, and the Clohessy family's lifestyle becomes better than that of the McCourts (366). In other words, McCourt weaves in this character not to show how things could have been worse for him in Limerick, but in order to make the reader feel even more pity for him, the son of such a "shiftless loquacious alcoholic father".

The only significant counterpoint presented in the book is America, a land undoubtedly not without its poverty and problems, but still a place which, unlike Rwanda, is bound to provide a favourable comparison with Ireland. McCourt reveals his awareness that America is a foil for Ireland, when hearing a Billie Holiday song makes him say: “Oh Billie, Billie, I want to be in America with you and all that music, where no one has bad teeth, people leave food on their plates, every family has a lavatory, and everyone lives happily every after” (320). The irony of the fact that Billie Holiday was a blues singer whose own life was undeniably tragic might not pass the reader by, but there is no underscoring of this irony by McCourt in the text. It might be argued that his belief is the product of childish *naïveté*, because the absurdity of his sweeping claim is two-fold. Firstly, the lines which Holiday is singing, are: “I can’t give you anything but love, baby / That’s the only thing I’ve plenty of, baby” (*ibid*). As with many blues songs, these lines highlight the actual poverty in America, in contrast with McCourt’s gloss on life in America. Secondly, McCourt has had first-hand experience of this American poverty, when his family lived in Brooklyn in his very young years. In fact, contrary to McCourt’s claim that every American family has its own toilet, while in America, the McCourt family did not have a lavatory of their own, but had to use the communal toilet in the hall of their flats (32). In a sense, McCourt is conveniently “forgetting” those aspects of real existence which do not fit the ideal picture he is painting of America, thereby idealising America and making his Irish existence look even more bleak. However, this childish *naïveté*, if it is that, is perpetuated into an adult *naïveté* in *’Tis*, which subscribes to the American dream by clearly suggesting that McCourt’s success, if not his very survival, has everything to do with coming to “the land of opportunity” – America. I suspect, therefore, that rather than guilelessness, McCourt is exposing a more canny, commercially-

driven aspect of his personality, as will be discussed below shortly.

Ernest Gellner has argued that nationalism is a kind of idealism – nations can be seen as, in part, “groups which *will* themselves to persist as communities” (53). Ernest Renan has also argued that nationalism is constructed from half-remembered (or, more accurately, half-*forgotten*) “truths” about a group of people (11). If this is the case, then it might appear that the primary nationalism which is evident in *Angela’s Ashes* is an American nationalism, rather than an Irish one. We have already seen how McCourt “forgets” elements which do not conform to his ideal, by “forgetting” that he knows first-hand that not everybody in America has a lavatory. Moreover, the fact that America, rather than Ireland, is the idealised land to which McCourt strives to belong is clarified in Jim Saah’s interview with Frank McCourt. Here, McCourt describes America as the “light at the end of the tunnel”. He says: “Like the Chinese idea of the Golden Mountain, it was always there” (“UNo MAS” 2). In the memoir, almost all of the adolescent McCourt’s actions are motivated by the desire to return to America, and his brothers and mother all echo his desire (Mccourt 417). Furthermore, as has been discussed, the memoir begins with the assertion that the McCourts would indubitably have been better off in America.

McCourt’s idealisation of America might possibly be motivated by economic concerns.

After all, with a readership of many million more people than there are in Ireland, it would seem pragmatic to pander to American people’s national pride by portraying America as truly being the land of opportunity. R.F. Foster has convincingly argued that the massive success of *Angela’s Ashes* is in part because of the book’s ability “to satisfy a felt or perceived need”,

particularly in the case of *Angela's Ashes* because of “the traditional Irish readiness to commercialize the past . . . and the complex attitude of the United States to what it expects the Irish to be, and the enduring pride and reassurance that Americans find in hot water and flush lavatories” (29). And so, McCourt’s canny commercialism, to which I referred earlier, is his realisation of this fact, and his indulgence of this “perceived need”⁵.

Despite his idealisation of America, however, McCourt sees himself as Irish. If national identity consists of national pride and a feeling of national belonging, then McCourt’s national identity seems split: he seems to feel proud of being American, and yet he also feels as though he belongs to Ireland⁶, this feeling of “belonging” being what Herzfield, in an unpublished paper cited by Delanty, calls ““cultural intimacy””, which Delanty glosses as “the intimate ties of family and kinship which have provided nationalism with its enduring discourse of power” (Delanty 130).

It seems to be a fair assertion that it is the Irish aspect of McCourt’s national identity which interests readers more than his American one, as the reviews, discussed above, strongly suggest. And in validation of the fact that this Irish identity is “authentic”, when reflecting on the process of writing *Angela's Ashes*, McCourt said that despite all the foreign influences on his life – the American ethos accessible in popular culture, and the English Victorian standards promulgated by the old-fashioned colonial-style Irish education system⁷ – there was a “reality of being Irish” which he could not ignore:

But when I sat down to scribble things, what was staring me in the face was the reality of being Irish, and that was the last thing I wanted to write about –

the horror of the poverty all around us and the characters all around us in Limerick. (“Learning” 67 - 68)

So, with the introductory words which present McCourt’s belief that the worst kind of childhood is the “miserable Irish Catholic childhood” (1), the reader is fore-warned that the narrative will be a sad tale – not tragic, for it lacks the truly admirable hero which the genre of tragedy requires (unless McCourt identifies so with the mythological Irish hero of his father’s stories – Cú-Chulainn – that he sees himself as such a figure). And indeed a gloomy story is told.

McCourt is the first child of Angela and Malachy McCourt, produced after a pre-marital “knee-trembler” against a pub wall in New York. Despite their impoverished circumstances, Malachy’s alcoholism, and Angela’s promise to her sister that she will have no more children, McCourt gets four siblings in quick succession. Three of these children die (unsurprisingly, considering the lack of food and nurturing given to the children), to be “replaced” by two brothers later. The more misfortune befalls the family, the more Malachy Senior falls into alcoholic ways (described by an Italian American character in the book as “the problem, the Irish thing” (27)), regularly drinking the dole money:

The morning after Oliver’s burial Dad went to the Labour Exchange to sign and collect the week’s dole, nineteen shillings and sixpence. He said he’d be home by noon, that he’d get coal and make a fire, that we’d have rashers and eggs and tea in honor of Oliver. . . . There was no sign of him till we heard him, long after the pubs closed, rolling along Windmill Street . . . (80)

Periodically, throughout the book, his father returns home drunk like this and this is when his nationalist fervour becomes prominent, as Malachy Senior makes his children swear to die for Ireland. In part because of Malachy Senior's fierce nationalism, McCourt's parents attempt to make McCourt a model Irish boy, not only by making him sing his father's nationalist songs, and swearing to die for Ireland, but also by making him go to Irish dancing lessons, which is too effete for him. Says McCourt: "I wonder how I can die for Ireland if I have to sing and dance for Ireland, too. I wonder why they never say, You can eat sweets and stay home from school and go swimming for Ireland" (156). Instead of going to the dancing lessons, he takes the sixpence meant for the lesson fees, and goes regularly to the movies instead (157 - 161). Even today, despite the phenomenal success of *Riverdance* (which, again, was an American appropriation of an Irish form of cultural signification), many boys would agree with McCourt that there are better things to do with their time than dance stiff-armed to céili music. The limited contemporary appeal of such traditional cultural signifiers is indicated by Peter (the brother of Jim) Sheridan in his memoir, *44: A Dublin Memoir*. Sheridan describes how he is listening to an Irish Disk Jockey encouraging his listeners to "sing an Irish song". In response, he thinks: "Dead people. Dead music. Dead culture" (107).

Another tactic of McCourt's parents is to try to make him an altar boy, a position for which he is refused because of (in Angela's opinion) "class distinction" (167). This must have caused some relief to McCourt, judging by his purported delight in all things "boyish", for one can hardly say that altar boys in their crisp, white, lacy apparel, look like typical little boys. It is curious, in fact, that these cultural signifiers which supposedly elicit such national

pride are, indeed, based in what has been regarded as the “feminine” worlds of art and spirituality – despite the strongly patriarchal nature of nationalism, (which will be discussed below).

The strained relationship between McCourt’s worn-out, depressed mother, and his alcoholic father, worsens somewhat when Angela has another baby boy, called Alphonsus Joseph (Alphie). That in itself is not as bad as the fact that Malachy Senior is at such a stage of alcoholism that he drinks the five (desperately needed) pounds sent by Angela’s father for the baby – an act seen to be far more serious even than drinking the dole money. As McCourt says: “a man that drinks the money for a new baby is gone beyond the beyonds as my mother would say” (210).

Despite this, McCourt still cannot simply cut his father out of his life, for since his birth in America, McCourt and his father have regularly shared a special time together in the early hours of the mornings, when Malachy Senior would tell McCourt stories about mythological Irish heroes like Cú-Chulainn (12-13), whose national significance has been discussed in Chapter One. Sometimes he also tells his sons stories at night. To McCourt, his father is “like the Holy Trinity with three people in him, the one in the morning with the paper, the one at night with the stories and prayers, and then the one who does the bad thing and comes home with the smell of whiskey and wants us to die for Ireland” (239). Interestingly, McCourt’s father’s nationalism is equated with alcoholism. Both are put forward as negative attributes of Irishness – the alcoholism for fairly obvious reasons, and the nationalism for its blind valorising of the poverty and difficulties of life in Ireland. Nevertheless, McCourt’s

brand of national typification, evidenced by his “exposition” of such poverty and hardship, is no less simplistic than his father’s.

For a boy from Catholic Ireland, the Holy Trinity is an enduring and important symbol by means of which McCourt understands his world. In the passage quoted above, McCourt uses religious imagery to try to understand one of his most personal relationships – the one with his father. It is not surprising that this connection is made, for a father in patriarchal Ireland was more than one’s male progenitor – he was the source of authority, the patriarch; Constitutionally, he was the secular, or familial, version of God. In McCourt’s account, he is the Father-figure, “the one in the morning with the paper”, secure behind his privileged barrier of daily news (bearing an uncanny resemblance to O’Faolain’s great-grandfather). He is the Son, or representative of his Father, who passes on the word (of God) to the family under his care with nightly “stories and prayers”. And he can be ironically viewed as the Holy Ghost – or unholy receptacle for spirits; the one who “comes home with the smell of whiskey”. Malachy Senior’s complex personality cannot be understood by McCourt in anything else but religious terms, for these simplify the complexities of life, and make symbolic markers out of existential confusions⁸.

The process of simplifying these complexities is not unlike the process of assimilating diverse people under the banner of “national identity”, by “forgetting” the differences between them. And in this process, too, the father-figure is of utmost importance. Just as there is an etymological connection between the words “patriarch”, “patriarchy”, and “patriotism”, so too is there a meaningful connection between these concepts, particularly in

Ireland, where the growth of the nationalist movement primarily went hand-in-hand with the Church's assertion of power, and where the nationalist Irish Constitution is largely shaped by patriarchal Catholic precepts⁹. So, Irish nationalism reveals the conflation of *patriotism* (literally as well as figuratively), with religion and nationalism. Further explicating this link, Johnson and Cairns have argued that the Irish "triumph of nationalism resulted in the subordination of women" (5).

The following quotation neatly shows how, in Ireland, as elsewhere, religion supports and perpetuates patriarchy, with misogynistic beliefs supposedly being unquestionable, because they derive from the ultimate patriarch and source of all power – God. However, the extract also humorously and ironically shows how, in practice, women have managed to negotiate some forms of power in the domestic sphere, despite the patriarchal nature of the institutions in Ireland. After the birth of Alphie, Angela decides there will be no more children:

Dad says, The good Catholic woman must perform her wifely duties and submit to her husband or face eternal damnation.

Mam says, as long as there are no more children eternal damnation sounds attractive enough to me. (246)

The reader can sympathise with Angela's sentiments, as McCourt alone causes her sufficient worry, not least of all when he is rushed into hospital on the day of his Confirmation with typhoid fever. While recovering, McCourt reads his first lines of Shakespeare, and falls in love with them (222), so much so that at a later stage of the narrative, he says, "Shakespeare is like mashed potatoes, you can never get enough of him" (319). This analogy, of course,

whether intentionally or not, further characterises McCourt as a “typical” potato-loving Paddy. It is also an oblique reference to the “authentic” literary tradition which Foster argues has so obviously shaped the narrative of *Angela’s Ashes*. What might be surprising is that an Irish boy would enjoy Shakespeare so, when the terms of reference in Shakespeare’s work are so different from those in McCourt’s life. Following Daniel Corkery, one might argue that McCourt’s enjoyment of Shakespeare explains the disdain with which McCourt describes Ireland, for Corkery has argued that the educational use of signifiers of English culture, like Shakespeare, provide Irish children with an “alien medium” through which they learn to view, and feel dislocated from, their land – Ireland (Kiberd 555).

To try to support his destitute family after his father abandons them and his mother is forced to beg for food, McCourt gets a job assisting the coal deliverer, but is compelled to quit after the coal dust affects his eyes (309). He is also obliged to leave school after primary level, as the Christian Brothers refuse to accept him into senior school (337). On hearing this, McCourt’s headmaster “is disgusted by this free and independent Ireland that keeps a class system foisted on us by the English”¹⁰. To his pupils, Mr O’Halloran says: ““You must get out of this country, boys. Go to America, McCourt. Do you hear me?”” (338). With entreaties like that, it is unsurprising that McCourt tended to view America with rosy spectacles, in contrast with the way he saw Ireland. This disillusionment with “this free and independent Ireland” is prefigured earlier in the book, when the McCourts first come back to Ireland. An ex-soldier in Dublin comments to Malachy Senior: ““I think we were better off under the English”” (50).

Certainly, supposedly “independent” Irish people in *Angela’s Ashes* continue to be poverty-stricken, and Irish landlords have become as cruel as the notorious English landlords who were so despised in the Famine days, by summarily evicting indigent tenants. Being so poor that they are unable to pay the rent, Angela and her four sons move in with her cousin “Laman” Griffin (324), who abuses the boys and has sex with Angela (the issue of her consent is unclear). Unhappy in such an environment, McCourt moves out and gets a job as a telegraph boy (364). This job allows him to grow up in many ways: not only does he earn a pound a week which helps support his family, but he also loses his virginity to a girl dying of tuberculosis (379). Furthermore, he has experiences which make him a little less guileless. On one occasion, he goes to deliver a sympathy telegram, and the English husband of the deceased locks him in a room with the body, and forces him to drink sherry. McCourt tries to refuse with a polite: ““Ah, no, thanks.”” To this, the husband says: ““Ah, no thanks. That puny Celtic whine. You people love your alcohol. Helps you crawl and whine better. Of course you want food. You have the collapsed look of a starving Paddy. Here. Ham. Eat”” (384).

This is a classic example of the kind of racist stereotypes that were discussed in Chapter One of this thesis. Not only does the Englishman, Mr Harrington, assume that McCourt (now aged 14) is on the road to alcoholism, he also speaks to him in the monosyllabic commands one would use to address a dog. Ironically, of course, we learn in *'Tis* that McCourt does indeed suffer from alcoholism, but this is as an adult, and cannot be foreseen by the narrative of *Angela’s Ashes*. In a sense, therefore, McCourt’s own life is a validation of at least one Irish stereotype, just as *Angela’s Ashes* corroborates stereotypes about the defeated Irish

mother, and the drunken, unemployed Irish father. Somehow, however, such stereotypical attitudes seem to sound more acceptable coming from one who claims to be Irish, rather than one who is from the oppressor class – the English¹¹.

Another trope which McCourt deploys is that of the conniving, dishonest Irishman. He is fortunate enough to get a second job with a money lender, Mrs Finucane, writing threatening letters on her behalf (388), which allows him to save extra money. He also gets a job with Easons, the newsagents, and makes over ten pounds by selling a banned page on contraception that manages to slip into Ireland (411). After Mrs Finucane dies and McCourt finds her body and all her money, he helps himself to fifty-seven pounds and has the fare to go to America (417), which he promptly does. The book ends with the ship docking in America, and McCourt being seduced by a beautiful woman. A sailor who is with him asks: “‘Isn’t this a great country altogether?’” (425). McCourt answers “‘’Tis’” (426), this word being the title of McCourt’s subsequent memoir about life in America.

It remains incontrovertibly true that *Angela’s Ashes* has been nationally very important to Ireland. A good indicator of this is the extent to which the book stirred Irish people’s emotions, in all directions. I have already discussed how Richard Harris reacted to the book. When I was living in Ireland, Frank McCourt came over to Ireland to accept the “Freedom of Limerick” as a result of the popularity of *Angela’s Ashes*. During an Irish radio interview, he received a very mixed response from callers. Many people claimed he had done Ireland a great service by bringing Irish problems to the attention of the world, whilst a few people criticised his story, saying (amongst other things) that he would burn in hell for lying about

the church.

This resistance to McCourt's story has been described by one reviewer as his having "the odd fist shaken in his face" (Tosh 1), which she claims does not affect him. Tosh says McCourt "waves off any ill feelings those back home in Limerick, Ireland, may harbor against him for writing about his bleak childhood", despite the fact that at one of McCourt's first book signings, "a man tore up his novel [is this a significant choice of word?] and labelled it a disgrace to Ireland" (*ibid*). Despite this negative reaction, the less vocal, yet stronger, forces are those of approval, and these kept *Angela's Ashes* in the New York Times best-seller list for over 52 weeks (Tosh 1), as well as on a number of other best-seller lists ("Top Ten This Week", "www.ozlit.org").

So, *Angela's Ashes* is significantly popular. However, it remains to be proven that McCourt's popularity is because he is seen to be nationally representative. His being accorded the title "Prince of the Diaspora" (McCarthy 248) might certainly go some way to convincing one of this fact. Furthermore, McCourt's assumption of a representative Irish identity can be observed by a look at some reviewers' comments about *Angela's Ashes*. An Internet reviewer says the book is "full of Irish wit and pathos" ("Barnes and Noble.com" 4). Reviewers who are quoted in *Angela's Ashes* itself also stress McCourt's national identity. Mary Karr says: "Frank McCourt's lyrical Irish voice will draw comparisons to Joyce", which is precisely what Michiko Kakutani of *The New York Times* does ("Barnes & Noble.com" 4), as well as Walter Ellis (also quoted in *Angela's Ashes*): "Mccourt is a fully paid-up subscriber to the sub-Joycean school of Irish letters" (Ellis in McCourt n.p.)¹².

Nuala O’Faolain makes a rather surprising appraisal, by using an archetypally British writer as a point of comparison: “Our first Irish Dickens . . . Big, strong, unashamed sentiment . . . the thing Irish people run away from, afraid of their own hearts” (*ibid*)¹³. It is true that both O’Faolain and McCourt suffered emotional deprivation as a result of parental neglect, and this partially justifies O’Faolain’s claim that sentiment is something which Irish people run away from. Paradoxically, however, one of the hackneyed conceptions of Irish people is that they are sentimental. As an example, one could think of the well-known Irish tradition of holding wakes with women keening all night long, or the indescribably lachrymose tones of some traditional Irish ballads. It is true that McCourt’s father is said to have kissed him only once, and when Malachy Senior did so, McCourt felt “so happy” he felt like “floating out of the bed” (218). Nevertheless, when Malachy Senior gets drunk, he gets exceedingly sentimental about Irish politics and nationalism. However, there are a few more things which are considered permissible to be sentimental about, as McCourt explains when he says: “You’re allowed to say you love God and babies and horses that win but anything else is a softness in the head” (239).

Gail Caldwell of the *Boston Globe* compares McCourt’s story to the climate and topography of its setting, saying that McCourt has “a style as warm and bone-dry as his Limerick and the River Shannon were cold and wet. Unguarded and stunningly unpretentious, *Angela’s Ashes* creeps up on you with all the ghost-like force of a winter afternoon in Ireland” (*ibid*).

Clearly, reviewers believe that McCourt’s “being Irish” is as important as Alan Paton’s being South African, and adds significantly to the meaning of his work. In an important sense, then, it is what McCourt represents, rather than who he is, that is important to his audience –

a fact he knowingly plays up to with his employment of certain Irish stereotypes.

Caldwell's comment interestingly raises the idea that literature is both nationally significant and rooted in the lie of the land from which it comes. In trying to underscore how *Irish Angela's Ashes* is, she resorts to mixed metaphors, drawing on that well-known Irish standard (one which is exploited in the book, as well as the film) – the bad weather. She also makes reference to topographical features: the town of Limerick and the River Shannon which runs through it.

The Land is a central trope in much Irish literature. Corkery has argued that there are three crucial forces at work in Ireland: Religion, Nationalism, and the Land. Similarly, it could be claimed that there are three central forces which shape Yeats's work: spirituality, nationalism, and a pastoral vision of the Land. For Synge, of course, the West of Ireland is far from Arcadian – it is a harsh and unforgiving landscape. Nevertheless, both writers use topography to illustrate their understanding and vision of Ireland. Just as the creation of national identity is reductive and essentialising, and so cannot tell the full story, so too is any appeal to "the Land" bound to be emblematic rather than complete in its understanding of as complex a thing as a country: its people, politics, and cultures.

Linking this point to the argument offered in Chapter One, that the kind of Irish identity which was evidenced in cultural nationalism was founded on some kinds of inversions of colonial stereotypes, this process of essentialising in order to convey key points is not unlike the very process of drawing maps - a quintessential colonial endeavour if ever there was one.

Even nowadays, Irish people themselves “essentialise” Ireland, in a graphic sense. Tourists in Dublin are given a “Literary Dublin” map, or a map of “Famous Pubs of Ireland” – presenting an invented version of a bigger reality. This essentialising is, therefore, not simply a colonial undertaking, a fact which has been noted in the first chapter, which spoke about Yeats’s “arrogant indifference to the actual landscape” of the Ireland of his poems (Lloyd 65). Earlier, however, the British mapped Ireland out, changing “unpronounceable” Irish place-names into English, or Hiberno-English ones, thereby appropriating and reductively “simplifying” a more complex reality, in much the same way as they “essentialised” the Irish identity on which McCourt trades in *Angela’s Ashes*.

One of the reasons why McCourt might feel so Irish is because of his sense of belonging on first arriving in the country. What makes it possible to feel this belonging are the stories that his father told him about Cú-Chulainn, that formed the basis of their bonding. When the McCourts arrive in Ireland, Malachy Senior takes McCourt to the General Post Office in Dublin to see the statue of Cú-Chulainn. McCourt says: “I feel tears coming on because I’m looking at him at last, Cuchulain, there on his pedestal in the G.P.O.” (54). The irony of the situation is that the Irish taxi driver who takes them to the G.P.O. does not know the significance of Cú-Chulainn (55), yet a child born in America does, and thus feels a sense of belonging to a country because he is aware of its myths.

Benedict Anderson has famously theorised that national identity formation occurs as a result of the “imagined community” which is the audience of “print capitalism” (24-36). What this theory ignores is the vital role of reinforcement of communal belonging via oral culture. In

Ireland, particularly, verbal play and oral culture is rich and very much a part of daily existence, from the amount of talk generated on local bus trips, to the importance and popularity of “talk radio”. Accordingly, Lloyd has argued that Anderson’s account is “inadequate to the importance of oral transmission even in contemporary Ireland” (162, note 59).

Perhaps more than what we read as older children and adults, what we hear as young children (bedtime stories, lullabies, nursery rhymes, and local myth and legend) defines our sense of belonging, and the importance of oral story-telling in Ireland is underscored in *Angela’s Ashes* by the character Seamus, an illiterate man who recites poems (like “The Highwayman”), to the delight of his audience (261). It is certainly through these “texts” that one defines one’s sense of wrong and right, and consequently of who the villains and the heroes are, which in turn generates a sense of belonging: “them” and “us”¹⁴. Villains are clearly identifiable, and often come from strange countries. Heroes, like Cú-Chulainn, are brave and strong and pure – as one is persuaded to be. Frank McCourt loves his father for telling the story of Cú-Chulainn, for it somehow makes sense of the world for him. Furthermore, it gives McCourt and his father a space and time in which to bond – a space delineated by patriarchy and nationalism. When, as a child, McCourt thinks another boy is trying to “take” his story, he is exceedingly upset (26). He sees the story as deeply meaningful, because it is symbolic of his relationship with his father, a fact which suggests another implicit link between patriarchy, in the form of patriotism, and nationalism. In time, however, McCourt grows accustomed to the idea that the story must be shared, that it belongs to more people than just him (70).

The idea that stories are significant for a nation is foregrounded in the text, with a reference to a Jewish family. The son, Freddie, is a friend of McCourt and Malachy Junior in America. McCourt hits Freddie because, in McCourt's words: "he was trying to steal my Cuchulain story." In response to this, Malachy Senior says, "Och, now. Freddie doesn't care about the Cuchulain story. He has his own story. Hundreds of stories. He's Jewish" (28). The implication there is that Freddie's being Jewish is defined (at least partially) by his having "Jewish" stories. Consequently, McCourt seems to be tacitly suggesting that his "having", or venerating, the Cú-Chulainn stories affirms his Irish identity. In effect, therefore, McCourt is engaged in the same process Yeats was involved in: utilising figures from Irish folklore in order to consolidate a sense of Irish national identity.

While the oral tradition may play a key role in establishing a sense of Irish national identity in the text, and while this complicates Anderson's theory, Anderson may yet have a point. I believe we can apply his argument about "print capitalism" to explain the popularity of the book's reception. To extrapolate on my previous gloss, Anderson has argued that the "print capital" (media, books, etc) of a country helps constitute its national barriers, by creating a homogenous "imagined community" of audience, which becomes enmeshed in the same spatial/temporal framework (24-36). It would seem fair to argue that many of McCourt's readers would see themselves as belonging to some kind of "imagined community". Most of his readers would have come from America, where people seem to be very interested in preserving their "Irish roots". McCourt remarks that the readers "want to know how you survived, because some of them have parents and grandparents who went through similar times" ("Learning" 80). These readers, expatriate Irish descendants, imaginatively explore

their Irish identity by mentally connecting themselves with the people who used to and still do live in Ireland. Moreover, the omnipresent existence of the Angelus Bell in *Angela's Ashes* is a lexical muezzin, calling the faithful to pray, denoting, more clearly than Anderson could say, the essential simultaneity of national existence.

This point is somewhat abstract, and there might very well be a simpler reason for the popularity of *Angela's Ashes*. This explanation is simple inasmuch as it is easy to understand that we all enjoy feeling comfortable, and that our feeling comfortable derives from being able to predict and understand our environment. One of the easiest ways of doing this is to categorise objects, people, behaviours, etc, into certain classes, or groups. This process necessarily involves some over-generalisation, and this leads to stereotyping.

A stereotype can be defined as: “within a culture, a set of widely shared generalizations about the psychological characteristics of a group or class of people” (Reber 730). Abercrombie, Hill, and Turner claim that “[s]tereotypes are often resistant to change or correction from countervailing evidence, because they create a sense of social solidarity” (242). Believing in such over-generalisations assists us in making daily decisions about our behaviour, and accordingly makes us feel comfortable about our understanding of and place in the world. I believe that *Angela's Ashes* is popular because it appeals to precisely this aspect of human nature. The book re-affirms our belief in certain stereotypes, and this makes us feel comfortable, and possibly even wise.

I have mentioned the Italian American character in the book who calls alcoholism “the Irish

thing” (27), as well as the Englishman, Mr Harrington’s claim: “You people love your alcohol” (384). A similar claim is made by the Jewish woman, Mrs Leibowitz: “It’s the Irish have the craving” (41). McCourt’s narrative unquestioningly reinforces such stereotypes. His father is a shocking alcoholic, with his fair share of comrades in arms. Even those characters who are not out-and-out alcoholics, like Pa Keating, regard having a few pints at the end of a working day to be a man’s right (79). Ireland clearly has a drinking culture, and is a country where, as McCourt argues, teetotallers tend to be mistrusted (*Ashes* 404, “Learning” 66). In *’Tis*, Frank McCourt describes his own alcoholism. Similarly, his brother Malachy’s memoir, *A Monk Swimming*, which hotly followed *Angela’s Ashes* in pursuit of the same success, reads like the filling-in of those lacunae in *Angela’s Ashes* made by the absence of Malachy Senior, when he is off on some drinking spree. In *Angela’s Ashes*, McCourt shows us what it was like to wait with his mother for the return of his father. In *A Monk Swimming*, Malachy Junior shows us what it is like to *be* the alcoholic father, living it up and spending the family’s money in pubs and bars.

That Irish people are prone to alcoholism is not the only stereotype perpetuated in the memoir. There is a general sense of quick-wittedness belonging to most of the characters, coupled with an endearing simplicity (68). There is the dourness of the Northern Irish family (45 - 48). There is the “defeated mother”, in McCourt’s very words, as well as the other kind of stereotypical Irish mother-figure, the bossy, proper, pious tyrant who strikes terror into her sons, a stereotype which seems to fit both Angela’s and Malachy Senior’s mothers. And then, of course, there are the astoundingly unworldly, yet tough and independent children – McCourt, his brothers, and all their friends.

One has to question the reason for the prevalence of these stereotypes in *Angela's Ashes*.

Could it not simply be that they reflect an undeniable state of affairs in Ireland? It could be argued that national characteristics are evident in people. For instance, the famed wit of Irish people can be seen in the irreverent nicknames appended to Dublin's statues. The statue of famous nationalist leader Wolfe Tone, which resides in St. Stephen's Green in Dublin, is surrounded by concrete blocks, and is mockingly known as "Tone Henge". The character of one of Dublin's most famous folksongs, Molly Malone, is also preserved in concrete in the city, and is known as "the Tart with the Cart". Similarly, the statue in O'Connell street of Anna Liffey, (the spirit of the river which runs through Dublin), is of a gargantuan, naked body reclining in a fountain (her modesty preserved by long, flowing hair), and she is known as "the Floozy in the Jacuzzi". However, it is only a few people who must have renamed these statues, and so it would not be fair to extrapolate from this (as people do) that all Irish people, particularly all Dubliners, are rapier-witted (although, to be fair, the perpetuation of such names indicates an appreciation of verbal wit).

Ultimately, statistically, we might be talking about the fact that, let us say alcoholism, affects a large percentage of the population. However, by no means is every Irish person an alcoholic. It would be deeply problematic to say with absolute authority *why* McCourt displays such stereotypes: whether he is playing to his American audience, who appreciate confirmation of stereotypes; whether he is "objectively" describing a real state of affairs fairly, one that just happens to conform markedly to certain stereotypes; or whether he, his family, and other Irish people somehow feel compelled to act out certain stereotypes. The "truth" probably lies somewhere in between all three options, and is probably different for

each person. The psychologist and academic Richard Brislin has asked: “What is the difference between making reasonable generalisations about other people and stereotyping? There is no easy answer to this question, and the area between ‘well-thought-out generalization’ and ‘stereotype’ is very gray” (Gardner 51). Therefore, it might be useful to employ stereotypes, but their use is limited inasmuch as the trait being stereotyped has only a limited accuracy.

It seems to me that the quality of reassurance offered to the reader by the employment of these stereotyped characters could be one of the reasons for the popularity of *Angela's Ashes*. The use of these characters is reassuring because the characters fit into such universal and widely-held assumptions about Irish identity. “Light” literature must be popular at least because the characters are sufficiently predictable to allow the reader to anticipate what a character will do, and anticipating correctly gives one the same thrill as working out a not-too-demanding “whodunnit” plot. More serious works of literature seem to challenge, or at least explore, such stereotypes.

It is in this way that Frank McCourt has written a book which panders to readers throughout the world, including the many descendants of Irish immigrants to America, who fancy that they have an inkling of what it means to be Irish, and who have their beliefs uncritically confirmed. These include the beliefs that it is perpetually raining in Ireland, that there is unbearable poverty there, that the English are racist bigots and the Catholic teachers are brutal towards Irish children, and that the Irish people are a nation of alcoholics and misogynists. All-in-all, the belief that there could be nothing worse than the “miserable

Catholic Ireland” is soundly argued for in *Angela’s Ashes*. One wonders whether McCourt was aware of the words of Edna Longley when she said of Irish-American relations that “it is in the Republic’s political interest to continue as a tear in the eye of Irish America” (1233), for Frank McCourt’s story certainly brought that tear to many a reader’s eye.

In his paper on the “aestheticisation of the Irish country people”, Edward Hirsch talks about the peasant being turned “into a single figure of literary art”, a practice we see at work in the poem discussed in Chapter One of this thesis: Yeats’s “The Fisherman”. Hirsch argues that, for writers employing this technique, “what matters is not so much what the peasants *are*, but what they represent” (1117). It could arguably be said that this is at least in part the approach taken by McCourt in his own memoir. More than an exploration of what constitutes McCourt’s personal identity, what seems to matter to both author and audience is that he represents a certain type of Irishness.

Angela’s Ashes lacks the moments of introspection one finds in a range of autobiographies – starting with the “father” of the confessional autobiography, Augustine (although this may admittedly be an unfair comparison), to other twentieth century authors such as Patrick White, in *Flaws in the Glass*, to the memoirs of McCourt’s compatriots, such as Seamus Deane’s *Reading in the Dark*, and O’Faolain’s *Are You Somebody?*. Instead of offering an absorbed exploration of the inner workings of McCourt’s personal identity, *Angela’s Ashes* shows how he and his family fit into broader social patterns, which means that there is a much greater emphasis placed on McCourt’s national, as opposed to personal, identity. As national identity is often expressed in oppositional terms, it is both reductive and emblematic.

It cannot do justice to the complexities of the inner, “private” world, the realm of personal identity. In the next chapter, I will turn to critique *Are You Somebody?*, which I believe deals more successfully and subtly with the relationship between national and personal identity.

Notes

1. Revealing other literary precedents in the text, and validating Harris's point about the "invention" in the memoir, R.F. Foster talks about the "eerie sense that this 'memoir' has been recalled through the prism of subsequent reading", citing the "fire-breathing priest's sermon" as being "straight out of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*", McCourt's love-affair with the "glamorous sixteen-year-old consumptive girl" being "very reminiscent of Michael MacLiammoir's autobiography", his working for the "aged female moneylender" owing "a large literary debt to Dostoevsky and Dickens", and, above all, claims Foster, is the "inspiration – and convention – of Sean O'Casey's autobiographies" (30).

2. The subject of naming raises interesting and serious questions about identity formation and the manipulation of power, which, while pertinent to both memoirs, unfortunately cannot be explored in detail in this forum.

3. The Alan Parker film *Angela's Ashes*, which was based on the book, has been criticised because of the way it handles the narrative voice in the film. Michael Gray claims that "the plot went astray on them [the actors playing McCourt] when it came to one crucial component that made millions of readers bear with McCourt through hundreds of pages of misery, hunger, and deprivation: the narrative voice" (56). Similarly, Amy Taubin claims that "Parker mutes Frank McCourt's riotous and extremely moving autobiographical account" (130).

4. The antagonism between the English and Irish is parodied when, for instance,

McCourt's father explains how a bird from England is to be blamed for the fatal attack on the Cú-Chulainn (38), and also when an Irish character in the memoir claims that he "wouldn't put it past the English" to have imported fleas to Ireland in order to "drive us out of our wits entirely" (60).

5. Commenting on an American film which was set in Ireland, O'Toole argues that Irish people "play out a dramatised version of someone's [*sic*] else's dramatised version of ourselves" (32). This seems to describe *Angela's Ashes* fairly accurately.

6. This idea of national identity being "split" between two countries is not peculiar to McCourt, nor indeed to Irish identity. Nevertheless, an interesting manifestation of a capitalisation on this "split" identity is Ireland's "national" beauty pageant, "The Rose of Tralee", which is open to women from all over the world, provided they have some kind of "Irish roots". This seems to be a graphic, although unusual, example of what Homi Bhabha has termed "hybridity", which he argues is a consequence of the post-colonial condition.

7. Chapter Four will discuss the link between colonialism and the Irish education system in more detail.

8. It is, in fact, partially McCourt's unwillingness to examine his mother's or father's existential confusions which also leads me to argue (as I will do more fully in Chapter Four) that the book offers too little by way of introspection, and that it thus fails to move beyond certain stereotypes. For instance, McCourt's depiction of his father follows the Irish literary trope of presenting the father as "a defeated man, whose wife frequently won the bread and

usurped his domestic power, while the priest usurped his spiritual authority” (Kiberd 380), and this account fails to provide reasons for his father’s pathetic state. It may well be the case that Malachy Senior’s alcoholism had something to do with his tacit understanding of the fictive nature of the Ireland he so valorised. This point can possibly be given some credence by the fact that McCourt likens the look in his drunken father’s eyes to that in the eyes of one twin searching for dead brother (209), but with so little evidence being provided by McCourt, this point will have to remain speculative.

9. In attempting to answer the question: “Who are the Irish?”, John Wilson Foster, a Protestant from Ulster, argues that being Catholic is the “winning definition” (254). He assumes that it is only really interesting to ask of Protestants whether they are Irish, because the poverty-stricken Catholics are, by default, Irish: “There were, of course, the ‘mere’ or pure Irish, but they were of no political consequence” (250). This comment draws attention to a slightly different dimension to the debate about national identity, and it is one I do not wish to develop here. However, what is interesting about this quotation is that, while growing up as a poor, disempowered, Catholic boy in Ireland, McCourt may not have consciously reflected on his national identity, but in hindsight, and with the eventual writing of his memoir, he was conscious of his Irishness. Evidence of this claim is seen when McCourt says: “when I sat down to scribble things, what was staring me in the face was the reality of being Irish” (“Learning” 67).

10. Such appropriation of colonial forms of oppression by newly independent colonists has been addressed by theorists like Chinua Achebe, Abiola Irele and Declan Kiberd, and has

been discussed in the first chapter, with regard to censorship.

11. In much the same way, telling anti-Semitic jokes is seen to be ethically problematic unless they are told by a Jew him/herself.

12. Highlighting once more the “literary debt” owed by McCourt, he admits that his attempts at writing his narrative were stylistically shaped by various literary phases he went through: “my Joyce phase and my Hemingway phase and my Faulkner phase” (“Learning” 76). The problem with such grandiose comparisons is that they tend to throw into relief McCourt’s literary shortcomings, and even the phrase “sub-Joycean” can be seen as something of a back-handed compliment.

13. The relationship between McCourt and Dickens will be investigated further in Chapter Four.

14. This point may seem somewhat at odds with my earlier claim that McCourt idealises America and denigrates Ireland, but the fact that McCourt still feels he belongs to Ireland, and still views Ireland with some nostalgic affection, means that there must be something which creates this sense of belonging and identification. As I claimed earlier, McCourt’s national identity seems to be “split” between feeling pride in being American, and feeling that he simultaneously belongs to Ireland.

Chapter Three

No Woman is an Ireland

Make a nation what you will

Make of the past

What you can . . .

Eavan Boland, "Anna Liffey"

Like Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*, Nuala O'Faolain's *Are You Somebody? The Life and Times of Nuala O'Faolain* is a memoir written by a person who grew up in Ireland. Like McCourt's work, *Are You Somebody?* is seen as being "typically" Irish: "Her voice is a resonant Irish brogue, steeped in the literary tradition of Dublin" (Nelson 1). The further similarities and differences between the texts will be explored in the next chapter. This chapter will offer an analysis of *Are You Somebody?*, relating the book to the particular social milieu in Ireland in which O'Faolain grew up. After all, as the subtitle indicates, the book is not just about her life, but also, her "times".

In the previous chapter, I explored the relationship between landscape and identity, in connection with McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*. Interestingly, O'Faolain's memoir ends with an exploration of the correlation between vista and identity. The end of the book might seem like an unsatisfactory place to begin an analysis, but I think it is a useful one. O'Faolain is talking about how she spent the previous Christmas alone, walking in the Burren, which is an impressive landscape of stone in the West of Ireland. She says this scene is "almost an

illustration”:

Behind me, up in the Burren, nothing knitted together. There’s a pre-historic burial site. There’s a village abandoned in the Famine. There’s a tiny twelfth-century church. There’s a holy well. There’s a mound of shells near a cooking pit. Each thing is itself, discrete. Near each other, and made from the same material, but never flowing into each other. That’s how the life I have described here has been. There has been no steady accumulation: it has all been in moments. (211-212)

Are You Somebody? is an episodic book in that the events of O’Faolain’s life story are not narrated chronologically. There is an attempt to sustain a basic chronological thread, but it is interrupted often enough to be essentially broken. In other words, it is not O’Faolain’s maturation over the passage of time which matters, so much as the way key events impact on her life, and affect her reaction to other formative episodes, which is her attempt to “establish her own identity” in the context of “an evolving Dublin and an Ireland struggling to become itself” (Nelson 2). To that extent, it is true that her life “has all been in moments”, and accordingly I will analyse the text thematically rather than consecutively.

However, I would disagree with the claim that there can be no “steady accumulation” if one’s life is presented, or seen, as being “all in moments”. The analogy with the Burren can be useful here. On the surface, the pre-historic burial site, the abandoned village, church, holy well and pile of shells are discrete. Yet, in totality, they speak of the history of the Burren, and the history of Ireland, and are thus united by their very places in time. Just as the scenes

in the Burren are both discrete and yet speak of a bigger narrative, which unifies them, so too do the episodes of O'Faolain's life add up to a more expansive whole, "knitted together", even if only by the very telling of the story. That whole is the presentation of her identity, personally and nationally. To hark back to Parfit's philosophy, if personal identity can be defined as Relationship R over time (the relation between one's "selves" over time constituting personal identity), then time is ultimately the important tool for conceptualising identity – as it is for understanding the relationship between the scenes in the Burren. If one factors time into the equation, there *is* a "steady accumulation", and thus a more or less coherent sense of a personal identity.

While O'Faolain does not, at the conclusion of the 1996 edition of the book, seem to realise the fact that the very telling of her story presents an apparently coherent identity, the overwhelming response to the book seems to have convinced her that indeed, to answer her titular question, she *is* Somebody¹. I believe the importance of this response cannot be underestimated. My understanding of the book is that, on three levels, O'Faolain is attempting to answer that question: "Are you Somebody?", and that the book is as much an attempt to answer the question for herself as it is to prove the affirmative answer to her audience. These three "levels" will form the structural skeleton of this chapter. On one level, O'Faolain asserts her "personal", gendered identity, as a way of answering the question: "Are you Somebody?". I will argue that the second way in which O'Faolain attempts to claim: "I am Somebody" is by "authenticating" her book by developing the connections and similarities between herself, her father, and other Irish writers. On the third level, she explores her national identity, in both of the ways identified in Chapter One: that is, her sense

of “being Irish”, as well as how she is seen by others to be nationally significant. It is particularly in relation to this latter point that the response to the memoir is so crucially important, for the publication of *Are You Somebody?* undoubtedly turned O’Faolain into a figure of great national importance.

These “levels” are obviously my own constructs, and are by no means mutually exclusive. In fact, it is the inter-relationship between these categories which most concerns me, and which will be examined towards the end of this chapter. But to clarify this relationship, one first needs to highlight and define these differences. I will begin, therefore, on the first level, which is O’Faolain’s assertion of her personal, gendered identity.

This analysis will use the term “personal identity” to refer to aspects of gender which impact on one’s “private” understanding of the self. The Second Wave Feminist slogan “The personal is political” correctly points to the interpenetration of these domains, and I do not wish to deny the wisdom in that point. However, in the case of O’Faolain particularly, this distinction serves as a useful way to differentiate between the “private” and the “national”, not least of all because her being a woman has indubitably shaped O’Faolain into the character she is. Of all the issues in Ireland, gender most undoubtedly blurs the boundaries between “private” and “public”, because of the patriarchal ethos in the country, which is in turn partially informed by religiously constructed gender roles; however, for fundamental purposes of categorisation, and to allow me to focus on different issues under the heading of the “national”, I shall still employ this distinction.

Another way of thinking about personal identity, in relation to O’Faolain, is to ask what makes her different from the people around her, what it is about her reactions to events which unmistakably marks them as the reactions of Nuala O’Faolain, and not somebody else. Of course, one’s “selves” change over time, even though one remains the same person. If we are following Parfit’s theory of personal identity, then the “person” is comprised of many, successive “selves”, and it is the relationship between these selves which constitutes personal identity. This explains why, in one sense, I am not the girl I used to be, even though I am still, in another sense, the same person. That girl is a different self, a different manifestation of “me”, with very different aims and attributes from those I have now. Therefore, the manifestations of one’s identity are not static, as the above questions about O’Faolain might imply. So, to be more specific and accurate, we should look at how O’Faolain’s identity is manifested or expressed at a particular time.

The best place to start, then, is in childhood. In brief, the story of her parents is Nuala’s formative story (as it is for all of us), and her parents’ story runs as follows. Nuala’s mother, Katherine, had 13 children, of whom nine survived. Katherine was described by her own mother as always having her “head stuck in a book” (6), and Nuala describes the care taken by her mother to preserve the drafts of book reviews which she had published in the paper – this giving Katherine “the only money she ever earned for herself, apart from the children’s allowance” (10). However, Nuala insists that the money mattered less to her mother than the self-respect which she got from the publication of her work. Nuala thinks that “[s]he could have been respected if things had been different. She could have done something other than be the drudge she was” (10).

Nuala's father was also a writer. Unlike his wife, he was eminently respected, socialising with the right people in the right places, writing columns for *The Irish Times* which were thought to be witty and urbane, under the nom de plume Terry O'Sullivan. The O'Faolain family, as a result, lived the pretence of a middle-class life, without the income, and with too many children to afford the lifestyle. Neither working class (because of the family's social pretensions), nor middle class (because of their lack of money), Nuala grew up in an ambiguous class position, which she still struggles to understand (13).

Another aspect of her existence which she still struggles to understand is her feelings for her parents. About her father, O'Faolain says:

Most memoirists in Ireland write about their fathers in a sweetly one-dimensional way, as if there were no unconscious. . . . [M]y feelings about my father were (and still are) contradictory. . . . Just when you thought it was safe to hate him, he'd make some loving and kind gesture. (171)

In the fact of her father being both kind and cruel, and in O'Faolain's ambivalent feelings for her father, we see the value of the distinction between "personal" and "national" identity, as I have constructed it. The "private" world can be, and often is, ambivalent and self-contradictory, whereas a "national" identity presupposes homogeneity, if not an outright adherence to emblematic, stereotypical characteristics, which suppresses the ambivalences of personal identity².

While O'Faolain is less explicit about it, she seems to feel as ambivalent about her mother as

about her father. On the one hand, she and her mother can share intimate confidences and a deep love of reading. At a crucial moment in her life, which is narrated at the beginning of the book, O'Faolain comes to realise that the following words, said by a psychiatrist, are true: "You are going to a great deal of trouble . . . and flying in the facts of your life, to recreate your mother's life" (4). This comment clearly shows how "personal" identity is shaped and informed by "external" influences, like social expectations, and (as in this case) identification with other people. That is how mother and daughter are united.

On the other hand, there is a degree of detachment in their relationship. O'Faolain will always only be one of "the children" (181), thus never a true friend, as far as her mother is concerned. As far as O'Faolain is concerned, the emotional burden of caring for an alcoholic parent becomes too much and one day, after trying to rouse her mother from a drunken stupor as she lies sprawled on the floor, "with the vibration of a single heavy twang" comes "the parting from her. . . . Breaking point" (180). This prepares O'Faolain for her mother's death, as "[h]er dead body was only the same as the body that had shut me out, that day I shouted at her through the window" (181).

The relationship between O'Faolain's parents is an interesting, and in some respects, a contradictory one. There is a strong element of love, and physical desire, between O'Faolain's parents: Katherine says that the two have a "middle of the night understanding", and boasts about "what confident lovers they were" (178). And yet their relationship is tormented, in part as a result of O'Faolain's father having a long-standing lover called Carmel (and in a particularly sick twist, having Carmel name one of their daughters Nuala (12), and suggesting

that O’Faolain’s mother name one of *their* daughters Carmel (173)). The fact that O’Faolain’s father could, with impunity, have such a long-term and public affair speaks of the patriarchal climate in Ireland, with the tacit approval of that classic hypocritical viewpoint that men’s philandering ways are “natural” manifestations of their active sexuality, whilst a woman’s cheating on her spouse is seen to be, at worst, depraved, and at best, pathetic. O’Faolain’s mother’s retaliatory affairs are viewed by her husband as the latter, and described by O’Faolain as “gauche” (12, 49).

When O’Faolain was growing up, a good Irish woman was one who washed and cleaned and bred babies, and (like Cathleen Ní Houlihan in Liam Dall’s Jacobite poem) waited patiently for her husband’s return, forgiving him his foibles. Striving to fill this ideal is the root of Nuala’s mother’s tragic story. O’Faolain says of Katherine that “[u]nhappiness settled on her gradually”, certainly assisted by solitary drinking and edicts like: “I like you thin” emanating from her husband (10-11). This pattern understandably influenced O’Faolain, who argues that her mother’s example was both powerful and damaging (2). In contrast, one could also argue, however, that O’Faolain does no justice to her mother. She emphasises her mother’s literary potential, mentioning the book reviews (10), without exploring her reasons for writing, or the kinds of books she enjoyed. So, while she does not write about her father in a “sweetly one-dimensional way”, there is a tendency to portray her mother as little more than the abandoned, alcoholic wife.

Yet, more realistically, both Nuala and her mother are influenced by society’s expectations, and unquestioned assumptions. For instance, despite the fact that Katherine has a “burning

resentment” and feels “trapped as a slave, kept out in a suburb with children” (90), she still recommends marriage to Nuala as the only way to achieve her approval. In a brilliant essay on the trope of the Irish mother in literature, Ann Owens Weekes says that in Ireland there was a

national preoccupation with the maternal, culminating in the formal recognition in the 1937 Irish Constitution that a woman’s natural and proper place is in the home as a full-time wife and mother. Such national idealization of the mother inevitably engendered an unquestioning cultural acceptance that motherhood should be the goal of every Irish woman, a guarantor of social prestige and respect. (100)

In support of this point, O’Faolain says in her memoir that: “The idea that it was desirable for all women to go off for their lifetime with one man and have his children as their life’s task was completely uncriticised” (*ibid*).

So, too, were many other patriarchal assumptions in Ireland unquestioned. As O’Faolain matures, gender issues become more directly relevant to her own life, in ways that will be explored below. Importantly, gender issues also impact on the very writing of *Are You Somebody?*, as will be discussed at a later stage in this chapter.

O’Faolain admits to being guilty of having fallen into the trap of believing it was her duty as a woman to get married and accessorise her (more important) man, most noticeably in her relationship with Michael, with whom she wanted to have children (despite the fact that he

refused to divorce his wife – a technical possibility for him), without “inconveniencing [him] in any way, or stopping [him] being free” (90).

While most of her memoir traces failed love affairs into which O’Faolain invests so much of herself, in her search for a sense of completion and (arguably) social and emotional “belonging”, O’Faolain also focusses on her formative friendships with women, and one in particular – Nell McCafferty. O’Faolain describes her relationship with McCafferty as “by far the most life-giving relationship of my life”, adding that they lived together for fifteen years (185). McCafferty is an Irish journalist who is well-known in Ireland as a lesbian, which could lead to speculation as to the sexual orientation of O’Faolain herself.

In the “Afterwords”, O’Faolain ironically asks her pets whether “Any Princes or Princesses Charming [had] come down through the chimney while I was out” (232). This comment seems to indicate that O’Faolain regards both women and men as equally potential romantic partners, and so the suggestion is subtly made that O’Faolain might have bisexual inclinations.

Like her mother, O’Faolain had crushes on female peers at school. This was vehemently denied by a nun who taught O’Faolain³. But O’Faolain says: “there is nothing to be ashamed of in how we made a romantic system to contain our rampant emotions”, and of the crushes themselves, she claims that they might have been melodramatically expressed:

But they were not trivial. They were a grounding in the affective dimension that was to matter most to us all our lives. They were not a mere substitute for

what we would have been doing with boys if we weren't in boarding school, which is what the patriarchy has always arrogantly presumed. Emotion was an element in the process of putting ourselves together . . . learning to differentiate our selves from the other selves around. (35-36)

This process of “putting oneself together” is what I have been referring to as the forging of one's sense of personal identity, and O'Faolain seems to regard female-female relationships to be more importantly formative than male-female ones. Proof of this belief can be seen in the fact that, as I have discussed, O'Faolain's attempt to recreate her mother's life indicates what a formative influence her mother had on O'Faolain, as well as the fact that O'Faolain's friendship with McCafferty was “the most life-giving relationship” of her life (185).

Admittedly, the innuendoes in *Are You Somebody?* are subtle, but the lack of outcry in response to the suggestions about O'Faolain's potential bisexuality is surprising in a country previously known for its conservatism and homophobia. This unexpected reaction may be partially explained by what I have already mentioned in Chapter One and which I will discuss again in Chapter Four – Ireland's shedding of neuroses, as a result of a social evolution which has led to a change in the way nationalism functions in a European-Unionised, newly prosperous Ireland.

Interestingly, however, O'Faolain does not question certain essentialisms herself. While part of her memoir documents her dedication to feminism, which speaks of her awareness of the debilitating effects of subscribing to rigid gender-defined social roles, nevertheless, O'Faolain

still perpetuates some essentialist gender notions. For instance, the argument outlined above that female-female friendships were “not a mere substitute for what we would have been doing with boys” (35) is predicated on the assumption that girls are “naturally” more emotional than boys. In fact, it seems grossly unfair to boys to imply (whether intentionally or not) that it is true only for girls that “[e]motion was an element in the process of putting ourselves together . . . learning to differentiate our selves from the other selves around” (35-36).

Another example of gender essentialising can be seen when O’Faolain comments about the cast of her documentary “for” (her interesting choice of word) transsexuals. She says:

When I took the men who had become women into the BBC club in Shepherd’s Bush they loved going into the Ladies. But they did things subtly wrong. In front of the mirrors, they’d hoick up their skirts to fix their tights. I’d never seen born women do anything like it. (138)

This comment ignores the many factors which affect gendered socialisation, and assumes that “born” women “naturally” behave in certain ways. Yet at the same time as she corroborates this belief, O’Faolain is able to realise that it needs to be questioned. For instance, O’Faolain is able to see that it was society’s expectation of Katherine, as a wife, to “naturally” have many children which ground her down, and turned her into a “drudge” (10) who “was in the wrong job” (7) of mothering. In other words, O’Faolain is simultaneously critical and supportive of essentialist gender notions which inform Irish society, and it is this sort of ambivalence which I have argued informs her “personal”, as opposed to her “national”

identity.

The issue of gender also indubitably affected the very production of *Are You Somebody?*.

O'Faolain purportedly had a disagreement with her first publisher about how many books to print. She wanted him to print fewer than 2000 (which he would not do), because she said "I thought it would be remaindered and they'd be looking up at me from every bookshop for a sixpence" ("Nuala O'Faolain and Frank McCourt . . ." 3). Her amazement at the reception of the book is illustrated by the two self-effacing thoughts which were the background to her writing her narrative: "'Sure, no one will see it' and 'What have I got to lose, anyway?'" (O'Faolain 214). What seems amazing is her thinking either of these thoughts at all, despite acknowledging that she is "fairly well-known in Ireland" (ix). I believe that this is evidence of the social effects of gender construction affecting the production of the book because her apologetic tone is reminiscent of the "apologetic" rhetoric which is common to many women writers, particularly those in a traditionally "masculine" field like travel writing, as Sara Suleri has argued, when she says that such writing is "compelled into a defensiveness" (83).

O'Faolain's fear of not being taken seriously, of writing an "unpopular" text, is indicative of the androcentric climate of O'Faolain's Ireland, where "[t]he very idea of an Irish woman opinion columnist would have been unthinkable for most of my life" (x). Yet O'Faolain is conscious that she has shattered this stereotype. She is an Irish woman opinion columnist, and the writing of *Are You Somebody?*, and in fact, the very positive answering of the titular question, strongly assert her personal identity in the literary world of patriarchal Ireland. Nevertheless, her uncertainty about the writing of the book, and its potential reception, makes

sense of the following “level” on which I propose to analyse her memoir: her attempts to “authenticate” it.

O’Faolain’s childhood, her relationship with and that between her parents, and the way gender stereotypes and patriarchy inform the development of her character, all fit into the first level of understanding the memoir, which is to understand it as her attempt to assert a strong sense of her “personal” identity, to affirmatively answer the titular question: “Are You Somebody?”. The second level on which we can understand the text is by looking at O’Faolain’s attempts to “authenticate” her book by mentioning friendships and relationships with famous Irish writers, not least her father. In other words, on this level, she is saying: “I am Somebody because of whom I know, and because of whose child I am”.

O’Faolain is not shy about mentioning her friendships with well-respected Irish writers and critics. For instance, O’Faolain elaborates on her professional relationship and friendship with Seamus Deane – who is, subsequent to his editing of the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Literature*, arguably one of the leading authorities on Irish literature. O’Faolain describes the time that she interviewed Deane after the publication of *Field Day*, and says that it was “one of the most complex” interviews she had ever conducted, for personal reasons (113). While they had been relatively close friends (according to her description) when they were colleagues at University College, Dublin (UCD), and while O’Faolain describes him as “a sensationally interesting literary critic” (114), she nevertheless reveals the pain he caused her by snubbing her at a conference in Paris, and how the hurt of that encounter stayed at the back of her mind during the subsequent radio interview about *Field Day*. In a comment which

once more reveals the interconnection between the “private” and the “public”, she says that:

“This is an example of the histories that inform the ostensibly purely civic life of a place.

They complicate Ireland enormously – North/South, man/woman, then/now” (116). As I will argue toward the conclusion of this chapter, *Are You Somebody?* is engaged in a similar process of “complicating Ireland” by telling a personal history which both affects and is informed by civic Ireland.

However, this point is slightly tangential to the one I wish to make now, which is that O’Faolain seems to be attempting subtly to endorse her significance in Ireland, if not the literary merit of *Are You Somebody?*, by elaborating on the well-respected figures with whom she was friends.

Another instance of fairly staggering “name-dropping” is the following:

Round in McDaid’s, John Broderick might be getting ready to go home . . . Tom McIntyre might be talking about writing with Tom Kilroy, who was not writing . . . Myles na Gopaleen might be in Neary’s, not talking to anyone (I spent an evening there once with Louis MacNeice and the two men didn’t address each other.) (79)

I have argued that O’Faolain attempts to authenticate her book in two ways: by mentioning her friendships with literary characters, and also by drawing parallels between her father’s well-known literary work, and her own, and the way she travels for her work (131), as did her father (11). The most explicit example of O’Faolain consciously foregrounding the similarities between her and her father’s work can be seen when she says: “I often wonder

whether it is by accident or unconscious design that I'm doing exactly what my father did [by writing about Ireland]. . . . He had an intemperate love for the fabric of Ireland. And I reap the harvest he sowed for me, in that, as in other things" (209).

This love for Ireland manifests itself for both O'Faolain and her father as a means of national identification. O'Faolain's father is fiercely nationalistic, changing his name from the Anglicised Phelan to the Irish O'Faolain (175). He nostalgically idealises the Irish Army and is scornful of his son who, trying to win his father's approval, joins the British Army, not realising that it was Irish nationalism, and not militarism *per se* which his father respects (*ibid*).

Bizarrely, however, O'Faolain's father changes the name of his wife, from the Irish "Caitlin", to the Anglicised "Katherine" (225), unwittingly revealing the complex relationship between both sides of the male/female, coloniser/colonised dichotomy⁴. In other words, I am suggesting that as an *Irish* man, he was the "colonised", and adopted his Irish name in an attempt to proudly reclaim his heritage. But as an Irish *man*, he was the "coloniser", and engaged in the colonial practice of re-naming, and Anglicisation. Clearly, the inter-penetration of gender issues, O'Faolain's attempts to "authenticate" her book, and feelings of national identification indicate that the three "levels" on which I am examining *Are You Somebody?* are far from discrete.

Accordingly, the point about the patriarchal structure of Irish society which I dealt with on the first level, is intimately connected to this second level, too (as it is to the third). This analysis

becomes clearer when one considers why O’Faolain seems to feel the need to “authenticate” her book by appealing to (mainly) male literary figures, in particular her father, as opposed to her mother. At the risk of over-simplifying, the reason for this can be said to be the following. It is a fact that, at the time in which O’Faolain was meeting these writers, it was the men who were valued by society, and who were considered to be successful writers, not least of all because of the comparative ease with which they could enter the “public” realm, as men. In other words, society saw the men as better writers, more “naturally” disposed to the occupation, and individual men naturally adopted these societal expectations. Many anecdotes in the memoir are examples of manifestations of endemic sexism, but one which is pertinent to the issue of being sufficiently empowered to tell one’s story is the following anecdote:

The young writers at Mary Lavin’s house were all men: the women were all women who were going out with the men. If you were a young female, no one asked you what you did, around the pubs of Dublin, or what you wanted to do. They assessed you in terms of themselves. You were welcome if you fitted in. The ‘literary Dublin’ I saw lied to women as a matter of course, and conspired against the demands of wives and mistresses. (75)

Clearly, the patriarchal environment in Ireland at the time resulted in women being subjugated in that classic way: by negating their personal identities in order that they might “accessorise” their men, throw into relief their man’s greatness. It seems that O’Faolain, in writing her memoir, has to some extent accepted gender stereotypes because she has emphasised her relationships with male writers as an attempt to authenticate her book,

partially because it was society which valued male writers more than female ones.

I would like to move on to the third level on which we can understand the book, which is that O’Faolain attempts to answer the titular question affirmatively by asserting her *national* identity. Again, when I employ that term, I am using it on two levels: firstly in relation to ways in which O’Faolain feels Irish; and secondly, in relation to how she is regarded by others as nationally significant.

Let me begin by exploring how she “feels Irish”, and comes to invest in the idea of her national identity. Interestingly, the memoir begins with her having something of a crisis of national identity. She is living in England, suffering from depression, and goes to see a psychiatrist, who begins the session by “cheerfully” asking what O’Faolain’s name is. She is unable to tell him, as her “self was too sorrowful to speak. And,” says she, “I was in the wrong place, in England. My name was a burden to me” (3). Her name is unmistakably Irish, and as such she senses that this token of her national identity – her Irish name – is a “burden” in a foreign country where she can never feel she truly belongs.

And yet, for most of her life, she did not seem to feel self-consciously “Irish”. Whether through genetic inheritance or childhood environment, O’Faolain turns to journalism as her profession, and follows a long-set Irish precedent of turning to England for jobs. Leaving Ireland as a young and unsophisticated woman and forging her independent adult life in England make her dislocation from Ireland all the stronger. When working on a programme about Derry for the BBC, she becomes conscious of her ignorance of her own country’s

history and complexities:

I knew nothing about Northern Ireland. I had been in Derry once, for one day, when I was twelve. But because I was Irish I got the assignment – just as [a colleague] would have got Turks or Somalians because of the colour of his skin, though he was born in West London. (138)

This passage not only highlights O’Faolain’s sense of dislocation from Ireland, but emphasises one reason why this dislocation matters so much: people automatically assume O’Faolain will meet certain expectations as a result of her being Irish, and an interest in, or knowledge of, the North is one of those expectations, (as is a love of potatoes and a predilection for drink).

After her return to Ireland, she “innocently” shows the Derry programme to an experienced Irish television journalist: “He was laughing uproariously by the end. He stood up, when the end credits began to roll, and walked off, never saying one word” (141). In the interests of the preservation of her dignity, in the eyes of others, she “paid attention, about the North, after that” (141), in order (at least partially) to meet people’s expectations of her.

This incident, coupled with the psychiatrist’s comment that O’Faolain is taking great pains to recreate her mother’s life, clearly both counter any tendency one might have to view personal identity as “authentic”, in the sense that it is pristinely formed without outside influence. Both incidents show how identity formation depends on a fulfilment of certain expectations (set by oneself and society) to conform to certain individual or national models.

Around the time when O’Faolain is at Oxford, her Irish friend at Cambridge is presumed, at her first college dinner, to want potatoes, as she is from Ireland. O’Faolain is amazed: “I never thought of being from Ireland. I belonged [in Oxford]. I had read so many novels about this. This was where I came from – from inside the books I’ve read” (97-98). This assertion, coupled with O’Faolain’s not “feel[ing] Irish in anything” (158) further corroborates Corkery’s point (traced in Chapter Two) that “foreign” reading material, in particular that which comes from Britain, alienates young Irish people from the country of their birth (Kiberd 555).

Despite her feeling of dislocation from the country of her birth, O’Faolain reaches an axial moment in Ireland, when her bond with the country is re-established. The moment occurs towards the end of the book, as the narrative circle is drawn on O’Faolain’s life and she explains her reasons for returning to live in Ireland. O’Faolain says she “didn’t feel Irish in anything”, and “knew almost nothing about Ireland” (158). Then in 1973 a turning point comes when a friend of hers, a journalist and Irish language enthusiast by the name of Sean Mac Réamoinn, invites her to attend a “Merriman Summer School”⁵.

At this Summer School, O’Faolain “fell completely in love with an Ireland which turned out not to exist. Yet,” she says, “this visionary Ireland gave me the impetus to break my links with England. And it pointed me in the direction of the real Ireland I am getting to know now” (160). This “real Ireland” (alcoholics and all), and O’Faolain’s understanding of it, are explored in the journalism appended to the 1998 edition of her book. However, by 1986, O’Faolain is able to realise that:

Ireland isn't just landscape, but history, and present society. There was famine and brutality and emptiness in the country. And the damaged underclass I was part of in the afternoon pubs was as much part of Ireland as its beauty. (170)

What is interesting is O'Faolain's acceptance of the fact that it was an imaginary Ireland which stirred her hitherto dormant nationalist feelings. This fits in with Ernest Gellner's assertion that the process of moving from an artificially constructed notion of nationhood, to nationhood proper, is inevitable. He argues that it is "nationalism which engenders nations, and not the other way round" (55). Thus, a belief in a glamorised ideal of a nation precedes an deeper understanding of the complexities of a nation. The Ireland O'Faolain fell in love with is different from the "real Ireland" she is getting to know now. Similarly, the Arcadian images of Ireland which Yeats used in his nationalist poetry are replaced, in later poems like "The Fisherman" with a more complex, critical view of the nation. I hesitate to use O'Faolain's word "real", because of the epistemological impossibility of "really" knowing an objective version of a nation. Nevertheless, the fact that O'Faolain's view moves from a romanticised to a more balanced one clearly fits in with Gellner's theory about the formation of national identity.

Precisely what this imaginary Ireland consists of is not explored in the book, but a fair guess would be that it is the same kind of idyllic image of pastoral Ireland which many an armchair or actual tourist is beguiled by, and, in fact, which informed Yeats's Arcadian nationalism which I explored in the first chapter, and which is also encountered in *Angela's Ashes*. What is made clear is the fact that the cartoon-like Irish characters at the school were highly

appealing to O'Faolain. Like the biographical sketches in the 1999 book *Lives Less Ordinary: Thirty-Two Irish Portraits*, these larger-than-life characters are astoundingly like Irish versions of *commedia dell'arte* characters, or, to continue more appropriately with the theatrical allusion, they are like the so-called "Stage Irishmen", the buffoon-like, simple peasants who were and still are the stock of Irish jokes. As I argued in the previous chapter, Yeats attempted to subvert this negative stereotype and create a nationalist figure out of this racial slander, and possibly the "characters" O'Faolain so admired at the Merriman Summer School were in some way indulging in similar nationalistic revelling in supposedly racially-specific eccentricities.

In part, some of these "characters" are objectionable precisely because of their adoption of extremely sexist modes of thought, in which they conflate national pride and patriarchy. The criticising of rigidly patriarchal nationalist tropes has been done already, and effectively so, by Eavan Boland. Her poem "Mise Eire" ("I am of Ireland") is named after a famous nationalist poem by Patrick Pearse. The speaker in Boland's poem claims: "No. I won't go back. / My roots are brutal" (116-17). This poem rejects Pearse's nationalism, focussing on Ireland's "exploitation of women and their suffering, figured in the image of a prostitute – a radical rewriting of the nationalist icon of virginal Ireland being raped by corrupted England" (Schirmer 357). The trope of virginal Ireland being raped by England is one which Seamus Heaney employs, for example in the poem "Ocean's Love to Ireland" – a sinister echo of Walter Raleigh's "Ocean's Love to Cynthia". Drawing on John Aubrey's biography of Raleigh, Heaney transforms this titular "love" into a rape, with "Heaney's poem imagining the maid backed by Raleigh to a tree 'As Ireland is backed to England'" (Corcoran 120).

In these kinds of formulations of national identity, one's "being Irish" is defined by one's not "being English", partially because of the binaristic nature of such imagery (male/female, England/Ireland). O'Faolain clearly does construct nationality in oppositional terms. As we saw in the beginning of this section on national identity, rather than O'Faolain feeling "Irish", the awareness of her national identity comes from her feeling "not English", from her name being a "burden" to her. Thus, she becomes aware of her national identity primarily in oppositional terms – by realising what she is not, before coming to understand what she is. Nevertheless, this is the springboard for a more complex assertion of O'Faolain's national identity in terms of "being Irish".

I would like now to turn to examine O'Faolain's national identity on the second level: how other people see her as nationally significant. This "level" can best be explored by an examination of the "Afterwords", as this section of the memoir describes the reception the book met, which in turn explains O'Faolain's national significance.

Of course, she was publicly known before she published *Are You Somebody?*. As she says in the introduction to her book: "I'm fairly well-known in Ireland. I've been on television a lot, and there's a photo of me in the paper, at the top of my column. But I'm no star" (xi). She may not be a star in the Hollywood sense, but O'Faolain is certainly a national figure. One of the multitude of people who read and responded to her memoir because they felt it to be so representative of their lives, says:

I am a seventy year old grandmother from County Armagh who shared that reality or unreality of an alcoholic mother who was talented and beloved . . .

Keep up your brave heart. You have a mission to say what we the inarticulate
or the hereditary [*sic*] hesitant feel and think. (O'Faolain 214)

This reader displays a faith in O'Faolain's nationally representative qualities, not only in that O'Faolain has told a story which is paralleled by so many people's experiences, but also because the reader believes that O'Faolain needs to fulfil a nationally representative role – speaking on behalf of “the voiceless” in Ireland. This nameless reader establishes a matrilinearity in her self-description: she describes herself as a “grandmother” whose own mother shaped her experiences. When this woman talks of “the voiceless” in Ireland, it would consequently seem fair to argue that she means women⁶.

Yet, in her Afterword, O'Faolain reveals a reluctance to see herself as emblematic of Irish women. She sees the praise she received from her admiring readers as a kind of projection. O'Faolain says of one reader: “I was being praised only because, though she recognised her own self-sacrifice, she was unable to praise herself for it” (124). About the reader who was quoted above, O'Faolain says: “She was projecting on to me the bravery it would take on her part to speak out. But it hadn't taken that bravery on my part. I wasn't knitted into society by grandchildren” (*ibid*). As a childless, single, middle-aged woman, Nuala O'Faolain is hardly statistically emblematic of Irish womanhood, although it is highly unlikely that even the most statistically representative woman could speak to more than a mere fraction of a nation. This brings us to the title of this chapter, and the recognition that adopting stereotypes as adequate modes of projection for one's life is personally debilitating, because it refuses to recognise one's complexities and self-contradictions. If one were to try to be a virtuous figure like

Cathleen Ní Houlihan, one would not be true to one's ambivalent, private self – the “self” of the O’Faolain who both loves and hates her father, for instance. In other words, while a particular woman might be nationally significant, she can never “be” an Ireland. Speaking of Cathleen Ní Houlihan, Johnson and Cairns have contended that, while there may be an “enabling potential in having a female deity who might suggest to women that they could themselves be active, decisive and potent . . . the danger remains of using this ‘authorized’ female figure to represent the unrepresentable” (4). Even the mythological woman after whom Ireland is named, Éire (or “Ériu”), cannot be seen as adequately representative of the nation. Consequently, the names of her two sisters and rivals (Banba and Fódla), who also sought the honour of being eponymous with Ireland, are also traditionally given to Ireland (*Oxford Companion* 175).

Despite her apparent reluctance to be representative of Irish womanhood, O’Faolain can nevertheless be accused of falling into the trap of adopting certain stereotypes. She plays down her personal bravery because she says she is not “knitted into society” by grandchildren (a wonderfully suggestive phrase), yet this simply reinforces the patriarchal notion that a woman gains her social worth (and consequently only has a social standing that can be risked), by being heterosexual, marrying, and having children, who in turn follow the same pattern.

O’Faolain is both personally appreciated, in all her complexities, and regarded as representative by her readers. Possibly it is by virtue of O’Faolain’s frank account of her many “selves” that readers feel they can identify with at least one aspect of her, and so make

her representative of their experience of Irish womanhood, or Irish life. The fact that she was nationally significant and yet also on a “personal” level with her readers, can be seen in the fact that when she went to book signings, she felt that “the event wasn’t like something literary. It was as if we were already intimates, the people who came to the signings and myself” (215). What O’Faolain struggled to absorb after the astounding response to her was that what she “had thought was merely personal had turned out to have meaning for other people” (216).

Therein lies an immensely interesting paradox: that the personal, in all its “privacy” and its glorious self-contradiction, can become nationally important. Theorists like Gellner argue that industrialisation, and the attendant leviathans of modernity, bureaucracy and colonialism put in place a system which makes it possible to reconstitute an identity based on group, rather than individual principles (62). This group identity is naturally the precursor to nationalism. According to this paradigm, it is dehumanising leviathans (modernity, bureaucracy and colonialism) which obliterate individuality in favour of group mentality⁷.

One could feasibly argue that “high” modernity (to use Toulmin’s phrase) is the context for the development of bureaucracy and colonialism, and it is modernity which attempts most explicitly to homogenise epistemology, a fact which is most clearly exemplified by the strictly rational and supposedly universalistic mould of Cartesian philosophy which epistemologically underscored the modern movement. Yet this reductive homogenisation of epistemology is sharply contrasted with pre-modern subjectivity⁸, not to mention post-modern epistemologies.

This is where the point I introduced in the first chapter comes into play. Epistemologically and consequently socially, we are constantly evolving. I would argue that Yeats's brand of nationalism reflects the type of nationalism we associate with stereotyped figures and the sort of representativeness that is based on a denial of personal identity. The peasant figure in Yeats's poems serves an emblematic purpose, to foster nationalism. On the other hand, the self-questioning speaker of *Are You Somebody?* reflects a different type of national identity; one which is incontrovertibly rooted in an individual history – not simply representative qualities. Accordingly, *Are You Somebody?* responds to a changed Ireland and offers what Gerard Delanty has termed “neo-nationalism”, the emergence of which “is indicative of a more general transformation of political culture: a gradual shift from monolithic ideologies to a diffuse politics of cultural identity and a concern with social themes” (127).

It could be argued that the genres are not comparable in this way. By definition, memoirs are “personal”, and the fact that two have become nationally significant is simply incidental. After all, *Are You Somebody?* is hardly being touted as a “nationalist” text. In reply to such an argument, I would make two points. Firstly, thinking in those terms (“nationalist” etc) is epistemologically biased in that the terms are loaded with preconceived notions of what it means to be a “nationalist” text. For instance, such a text might involve idealisation of a nation and explicit appeals to that which unifies people, for political purposes. Clearly, *Are You Somebody?* does not fulfil those requirements, and so in effect we have a non-argument. Secondly, as my analysis of *Angela's Ashes* has shown, memoirs can also be of national significance while using stereotyped tropes. In the next chapter, I will argue that *Are You Somebody?* is not as stereotyped, and so, while it speaks to “national” concerns and issues, it

does offer a real alternative to modern nationalist tropes, an alternative which sets a precedent and is developed in innovative fiction by young Irish writers as in the short stories in the collection *Shenanigans* (1999), which contains, for instance, characters of Chinese descent, living in Ireland, and calling themselves Irish.

So, I have argued that O’Faolain offers an alternative expression of national identity, one that employs some old tropes, but avoids too great a degree of trafficking in stereotypes, and is rooted in the complexities and ambivalences of personal identity. To end this chapter at the same point at which it was begun, there is an image from the final page in O’Faolain’s memoir which I believe can be read as corroborating this point.

After having attempted to give an affirmative answer to her titular question on the three levels I have dealt with in this chapter, O’Faolain concludes the book with a strong assertion of her presence, if not her identity: “in front of me is a vista – empty, but incredibly spacious. Between those two – landscape of stone, and wide blue air – is where I am” (212). On a literal level, one can imagine O’Faolain in the Burren, the lunar-like miles of bare stone around her, the dome of open sky found only in flat places, above her. In between these, stands O’Faolain, which suggests her physical “rootedness” in Ireland. But that in itself is suggestive of a deeper “rootedness”: she is not just a physical presence in Ireland; she belongs in Ireland.

The image can be read even more suggestively. I would like to suggest that we can see the stone and air as metaphorically significant, too (which is not to say O’Faolain intended this

reading). Stone and air are elemental, and O’Faolain’s position in between these two elements can be read to suggest the human capacity to live beyond the elemental – which is indeed the human endeavour. Furthermore, stone is tangible, air is intangible, and O’Faolain, and indeed her memoir, inhabit the liminal space between both worlds: the intangible “inner” world, and the tangible, “public” world. One can also see the stone as representative of hard realities remembered by O’Faolain, and the air as her impossible hopes for the future. Again, her position in neither realm, but rather, in the liminal space between the two realms, is suggestive of her ability to find a compromise between recollections of her hard past, and her unrealisable hopes for the future. But this realm of compromise in which she is situated is vast, which can be seen as hopeful (because spaciousness can be built on), yet tinged with an element of fear and loneliness, because of its emptiness.

In a sense combining all these readings of the image of stone, air and the space in between, I would argue that, graphically, the image could be read as suggestive of the flag of Ireland, with its three “bands”. The bands of the Irish flag are also symbolic. The green band on the hoist side of the flag is symbolic of the “old order” – the Gaels and Anglo-Normans. The orange band on the opposite side of the flag is representative of the “new order” – Protestant Planter Ireland. And the band in between these two warring factions is white, to symbolise, in Thomas Meagher’s words, “a lasting truce between the ‘Orange’ and the ‘Green’” (“The Irish Flag” 1).

If one is prepared to accept this speculative reading of O’Faolain’s parting image, then the relationship between her “personal” and “national” identity becomes even more clear. At the

end of her memoir, the expression of her “personal” identity, she is (at last) in a position of “belonging”. She has come to an understanding of herself, by engaging in the process of self-reflexivity necessary to write a memoir. She has also, however, articulated her feelings about being Irish, about “belonging” in that sense, and so, in the final image, national and personal identity become merged, for somewhere between the representativeness of the national, and the singularity of the personal, between the landscape of stone and wide blue air, is where O’Faolain is.

Notes

1. The capitalisation of the “S” is used to distinguish the two senses of “somebody”: anybody; and some particular, important person. When I capitalise the word, I refer to the latter meaning. This is arguably the sense in which O’Faolain means it; or, more accurately, it is the sense which is meant by the people who stop to scrutinise her face and ask her: “Are you somebody?” (xi).

2. It could be argued that national identity can be as ambivalent as personal identity. For instance, white South Africans have grounds for feeling that they both do and do not belong in the country, and that they are both ashamed and proud of the politics here. Such ambivalences are understandable, but the South African situation is quite different from the Irish one.

Not only has South Africa had a political history quite unlike any other country’s, but South Africa is multi-cultural and heterogenous, whilst the Republic of Ireland has been until very recently, and is still to a large extent, culturally homogenous. This is largely because of the inextricable closeness of culture and Catholicism in a country in which a staggering 92% of the population professed to be Catholic, as at the latest census, taken in 1991 (“The AllEarth World Factbook 2000” 3). Indeed, it is this very cultural homogeneity which tends to allow for a proliferation of national stereotypes. This point merely echoes the one by J. Foster which was quoted in the previous chapter, that having an Irish national identity is, for most people living in the South, a non-issue – something which is simply taken for granted.

Evidence in support of Foster's claim can be seen in the fact that both McCourt and O'Faolain became aware of their Irish identity in retrospect, and in opposition to the country in which they lived.

3. This vehement denial is an instance of the conservative, homophobic ethos in Ireland which was very prevalent in Ireland but is becoming increasingly less so. Nevertheless, Ireland remains a fairly homophobic country. In a recent survey, a mere 4% of 30-year old Irish people claimed to have homosexual "inklings or latent feelings . . . with very few claiming to be actively homosexual". Those who do claim to be actively homosexual are mainly women, while 7% of respondents declined to specify a sexual orientation, from which one might infer that there is a "'quiet' homosexual minority" ("The New Grown-Ups"). In 1993, homosexual activity between consenting over-18 males was legalised. However, a guidebook to Dublin, published in 1994, warns that "discretion is still the watchword" (Cullen and Boyle 14). The advice to err on the side of discretion is being followed by the biographer of Kate O'Brien, who will reportedly not be commenting at all on her lesbianism, in deference to her surviving family members, for whom such a secret would be too shameful to reveal (Breen).

4. This dichotomy will be further commented on in the following chapter.

5. Brian Merriman was an eighteenth century poet who ran "hedge" schools in Ireland, which were an alternative to the then British state-run schools which, under an act of 1695, were forbidden to employ or be run by Catholics.

6. Another group of “voiceless” people in Ireland are the travellers, people who claim to be descended from ancient Irish nobility, and who traditionally live a nomadic lifestyle in Ireland. This lifestyle has, however, disempowered them considerably in the modern Irish world. They are arguably the Irish “subalterns”, and are not discussed in O’Faolain’s memoir, and so are doubtless not “the voiceless” for whom the anonymous reader wishes O’Faolain to speak.

7. “Modernity” does, of course, cover a very wide variety of ideas and events. One could arguably say, if one takes the Renaissance as the starting point for the development of modernity, that individualism, rather than homogenisation, is a primary characterisation of modernity. It is also true that modern philosophy emphasises the individual thinker, archetypally illustrated by the figure of Descartes. However, these thinkers are expected to conform to the very *un-subjective*, reductive rigour of logic, without which their philosophies were seen to be worthless. For a critical look at the dehumanising, homogenising nature of “high” modernity, see Stephen Toulmin’s book *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity*.

8. This pre-modern subjectivity is part of Foucault’s analysis in *The Order of Things*, and is implied when he says: “the entire modern *episteme* . . . was bound up with the disappearance of Discourse and its featureless reign, with the shift of language towards objectivity” (385).

Chapter Four

Imagining Ireland

Fintan O'Toole postulates that there are three ways of "imagining Ireland", all suggested by Ireland's adoption of the metric system as, amongst other things, a symbolic break from the Imperial system. Firstly, the fact that the same distances are now measured differently suggests to O'Toole that "everything could change and still be continuous". Secondly, the fact remains that Irish people still think in terms of pints, miles and yards, which leads O'Toole to conclude "that if a culture is about the way people measure things, the residue of an old way of measuring hangs around long after it has ceased to have an official existence". The third way of imagining Ireland is that now that distance is measured by time ("since 1983, length is measured by the clock, not the measuring tape"), the "ultimate point of reference . . . is itself a journey". Says O'Toole:

These three lessons from the metric system each contain a truth about Ireland. It is a country in which change itself provides the only possible continuity. It is a culture whose ways of measuring things are often unofficial, vestigial, and unexplicit, even to insiders. And it is, above all, a country whose journeys can no longer be measured by fixed standards, but have to be gauged by their relation to other, imaginative journeys. (170-171)

All three points, as well as the assumption that there is an Ireland to which certain "truths" obtain, are crucial in my interpretation of the two memoirs. The imperative of cultural evolution is one of the contexts in which I would wish to praise O'Faolain's work, and

criticise McCourt's. The presentation of the persistent idiosyncrasies of Irish culture is one of the appeals of both memoirs, and finally, the need to gauge journeys according to other journeys is precisely the nature of this chapter – comparing and contrasting the existential “journeys” of Frank McCourt and Nuala O’Faolain, as expressed in their memoirs. This comparison and contrast will be conducted thematically, as I will look at certain issues with which both memoirs are concerned: in particular, exile; the interplay between nationalism, education, religion and the family; and censorship. The last issue is related to the chosen genre of the texts, and consequently, I will also consider the nature of memoir, and its role in identity formation.

Chapter One concentrated on the history which informs Irish cultural nationalism. It dealt with the Irish Literary Revival, and Yeats's attempt to create a sense of Irish pride and heritage. I described this process in the context of a kind of “cultural evolution”, where what is culturally significant changes with the differing demands of particular eras. Thus, I claimed that Yeats's work attempts to provide an alternative to the negative stereotypes perpetuated by the English about the Irish. In this chapter, I will argue that the popularity of *Angela's Ashes* and *Are You Somebody?* is the product of certain contemporary social requirements or expectations.

Of course, other social forces were also at work during Yeats's time. In the years following the Literary Revival, Ireland continued to change. Fifteen years before the start of the Literary Revival, the “Great Hunger” (as the Irish Famine is known) resulted in the subsidised emigration of starving Irish people to America in what could be seen as an attempt

to offer them a better life. This set the precedent for what O'Toole calls "the single biggest fact in the 75-year history of the Irish State": emigration (xiv).

Naturally, there were several considerations which informed the decision to help the emigration of Irish people. One of these considerations was that Irish people served as useful buffers between pockets of "civilisation" in America, and the dangerous wilderness. The ontological philosophy underlying this physical structuring of existence is revealing, for it shows, as Fintan O'Toole has argued, that Irish people existed in a no-man's land: they seemed to belong to "civilisation", as they were Europeans; and yet they had a reputation for being "uncivilised", as they were Irish (29). Furthermore, like the indigenous people in the colonies, Irish people were believed to threaten the British with "cultural pollution" (Cairns and Richards 5).

This pattern of Irish people mediating between "primitive wildness" and "urban civilisation" has been prefigured in literature, by Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*. The central character of this book, Kimball, is a boy of Irish descent, who is significantly given an undeniably Irish surname: O'Hara. As a *sahib* who can speak English, Hindi, Urdu, and Bengali, as a boy who is sent to colonial schools from which he escapes in order to live an Indian peasant's life for "holidays", Kimball negotiates Indian "savagery" and British "supremacy". Recent Irish literature has also explored the similarities and differences between Ireland and the "Third World", three noteworthy examples being Brian Friel's play *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990) (and the film version thereof), Joseph O'Connor's novel *Desperadoes* (1994), and Sebastian Barry's fascinating novel, *The Whereabouts of Eneas McNulty* (1998). In these four texts, as

in others, Irish people have been implicitly portrayed as being like Ireland: situated on the outskirts of Europe, too far out to really belong, yet too far away from any other land to belong anywhere else.

In this situation of ontological ambivalence, Irish people in America were not unlike the white women who accompanied their husbands to the colonies, and for whom the

symbolic signifying system, in its dichotomising of culture/nature, masculine/feminine, white/black, reason/sentiment, and so on, places (white) women and black people within the same categories. Not surprisingly, imperialist rhetoric offers specific examples of a metaphorical alignment between women and the indigenous, colonized people. (Driver 13)

Caught in the dichotomous hold of patriarchy and colonialism, the white woman in the colony both is and is not part of the hegemony¹, as an Irish person is the brunt of jokes in Europe, yet the “bearer of European civilisation” in other continents.

O’Toole talks about the way Irish women emigres would marry black men in America, while the very thought of such a union would not even be entertained in Ireland at that time.

Amazed, Charles Dickens commented on such unions, and subsequent to Dickens’s visit to America, “no popular construction of Five Points [a New York district] was complete without a description of a love affair between a black man and an Irish woman” (O’Toole 164). I believe the choice of gender and race is crucially important, for both are on the “value cusp” of the colonial epistemology which was informed by patriarchy and racism.

O'Toole also deliberates on the ambivalence which "comes from the fact that the Irish are not, in this dichotomy ["primitive" versus "civilised"], either/or, they are both/and. They are natives and conquerors, aboriginals and civilisers, a savage tribe in one context, a superior race in another" (33). Again, this comment highlights the fact that both personal and national identity formation is contingent on ever-evolving contexts. O'Toole claims that this ambivalent categorising of Irish people in America resulted in their being regarded as White Indians. He says: "In the emerging Ireland of the 1960s and after, the White Indian became a way of replacing history with irony, identity with a mongrel freedom, post-colonial angst with a jokey doubleness" (29)². I wonder if there could be some connection between this ontological ambivalence and the much noted Irish use of equivocation, as for instance in the saying, "and there you were gone", or the claim made by O'Faolain: "I was typical. . . . But there are no typical people" (vii)?

Nevertheless, this does not alter the crucially important role which emigration played in Irish people's lives. Only half the people born in Ireland in the 1930s were still living there 30 years later. The upsurge in the economy in the 1960s meant that the rate of emigration slowed then, but "picked up again in the late 1970s and early 1980s, so that the 1996 census showed that nearly 20 per cent of those born in 1970 were by then living in some other country." Out of a population of four million, 750 000 Irish residents visited overseas relatives in 1996 (O'Toole xiv). Crucially, however, the present Ireland in which people read these memoirs, and the Ireland which others imagine as they read the texts, is a very different country, as was discussed in Chapter One. In fact, in the year 2000, Ireland was able to boast an astonishing 20 000 net new migrants, which brought its population to levels not seen since

1881 (McCallister 36). The same economic changes which caused this change in emigration/immigration rates is also deemed to be partially responsible for exorcising Ireland's poverty- and emigration-inspired angst (Fay).

Yet emigration is one of the most important aspects of Irish social life in the contexts in which *Are You Somebody?* and *Angela's Ashes* were set and written. As discussed in Chapter Three, America provides not only the narrative impetus for *Angela's Ashes*, but also the over-arching dream-setting in Frank McCourt's life, and the foil to his existence in Limerick. Similarly, O'Faolain talks about children "being reared for emigration" (6). For many Irish people, this emigration was seen to be more like exile, as they felt forced to go, because of poverty and a lack of opportunities in Ireland. Miller and Wagner have argued that this is evident from the Gaelic word *deorai*, which was used to describe the fact of leaving Ireland, and which apparently corresponds better to the English word "exile", than it does to "emigration" (17). Furthermore, these emigrants knew they would never return to Ireland, if they even made it to America, and so a tradition grew whereby people would hold a wake, rather than a *bon voyage* party, the night before the departure of a loved one, a fact which is referred to in *Angela's Ashes* (418). Indeed, many of these Irish people did not return to Ireland, but settled in America, yet stayed fiercely nationalistic and proud of their "Irish roots", and their descendants constitute a large body of the audience for both texts, which is another reason why emigration is such an important issue in an analysis of the books³.

Emphasising the importance of exile in contemporary Irish literature, George O'Brien contends: "It seems only a slight exaggeration to say that without exile there would be no

contemporary Irish fiction” (35). The effects and uses of the trope of exile in Irish literature are multiple, but O’Toole argues that “[e]xile is a form of self-dramatisation, the assumption of a role, the tailoring of one’s personality to an alien audience. Exile makes things that are unconscious – language, gesture, the accoutrements of nationality – conscious”. He illustrates this point with the example of James Tyrone, the actor character in Eugene O’Neill’s *Long Day’s Journey Into Night*. Tyrone is torn between “his Irish past and his American present [which] is also a pull between life and performance, between being who he is and playing who he should be in order to be accepted in America” (O’Toole 37).

McCourt has explained how he became aware of his “Irishness” retrospectively (“Learning” 67), and one has to wonder to what extent he is doing precisely this “playing who he should be” in his memoir. He seems to have decided, following the pressure of “popular wisdom”, that certain stereotypes of Irish behaviour perfectly describe his life, and proceeds to enact these with enthusiasm. This point is given even more credence when one considers that *Angela’s Ashes* evolved out of, amongst other things, a comic skit on Irish life performed with his brother Malachy (McCourt, “Learning” 77).

For O’Faolain, her appreciation of her national identity – even in the form of her name – occurs when she is living in England. And it is not insignificant that she “rediscovers” Ireland when visiting a *gaeltacht* (an area with predominantly Irish-speaking inhabitants) in the West of Ireland. In Chapter One, I argued that a mythologisation of “The Land” was one of the central driving forces in the creation of the cultural nationalism spearheaded by Yeats. Without disputing the rugged beauty of the countryside of the West of Ireland, and its ability

to cause emotive responses in those who visit it, the West seems to be the nucleus of the fetishised Irish landscape. Its agrarian nature is figured as being synonymous with happiness, contentment, and a sense of national belonging. This is true not only of O'Faolain's memoir, but also of *Angela's Ashes*. Along with Cú-Chulainn, Lock Neagh is romanticised by McCourt's father, and the McCourt brothers are moved to see this lake as boys (48). Furthermore, the few moments of respite from the gruelling poverty of Limerick are offered by illicit trips into the countryside – thus juxtaposing urban misery with an idyllic portrait of pastoral life. On one such trip to the countryside, McCourt delightedly gorges himself on pilfered apples and milk squirted straight from the cow into his mouth, casting his hungry existence in Limerick in relief: "I'm wondering why anyone should be hungry in a world full of milk and apples" (180).

The feelings inspired by the land of milk and apples which lies so close to Limerick, are in sharp contrast to the tone of most of the book, which revels in an ultra-"realistic" portrayal of miserable Irish urban life, down to fine scatological detail, like descriptions of the reek of the communal toilet situated just outside McCourt's Limerick slum house (99). This contrast of urban and rural Irish life might add credibility to Declan Kiberd's criticism of the writing of Dermot Bolger "and his colleagues" (it is not entirely clear to whom this latter phrase refers) for being

less subversive than it sometimes took itself to be. In its underlying sentimentality about its youthful subjects as victims of social tyranny, it grossly exaggerated the malevolence and importance of priests, teachers and politicians. Although it prided itself on realistic engagement with the sordid

aspects of Dublin life, it may have unintentionally ratified the old pastoral notion of rural Ireland as real Ireland. (609)

While Bolger clearly does not make this comment with reference to McCourt, not least of all because he mentions Dublin, and does not generalise to say “Irish urban centres”, it is nevertheless revealing to apply this passage to Limerick, and *Angela’s Ashes*.

It is undeniably true that *Angela’s Ashes* is a sentimental account of a “youthful subject” who is a “victim of social tyranny”, although whether or not it overstates the “malevolence and importance of priests, teachers and politicians” is open to debate. The Catholic Church certainly believes McCourt did exaggerate unfairly, which is why it reportedly refused to allow any scenes of the film version of *Angela’s Ashes* to be shot in a Catholic church (Gray, Ransom and Kulak 34). However, one of the reasons given by Irish readers for enjoying the book, and an example of the context of cultural “evolution” in which the book is set, is that it spoke about real yet previously taboo topics, like the abuse regularly meted out to children by their priest teachers – aptly timed to coincide with a growing disillusionment with the Catholic Church which sheltered paedophile priests (St Peter 132, O’Toole 104 -112)⁴. To indicate that this concern is far from invented, or even passé, in a recent survey of Irish education, Fagan has described the “on-going psychological battle and psychological torture” suffered by scholars (19).

Furthermore, given the dysfunctional family lives⁵ that have been portrayed in some Irish literature (and *Angela’s Ashes* can serve as a case in point, for even if there is an element of

exaggeration in his account, McCourt's family life can hardly be said to be ideal), it is not surprising that two of Louis Althusser's other so-called "Ideological State Apparatuses", the Church and Education, should become crucially formative in the lives of young children. For boys like McCourt, the effect of such ISAs is compounded by the conflation of church, state and education in the distinctive social arrangement of Ireland.

This social arrangement has been outlined in the previous two chapters' expositions of *Angela's Ashes* and *Are You Somebody?*, which explored the circular links between the patriarchal social culture in Ireland, the rigidity of the ruling patriarchal Church, the Church's influence on the Constitution, and the Constitution's influence on Irish Nationalism, which obviously impacts on perceptions of Irish national identity. One of the key cohesive factors in this circularity is the Irish education system, which was (and possibly still is) characterised by a particular blend of nationalism and religion, as it was in South Africa's "Christian National Education" schools.

Both *Are You Somebody?* and *Angela's Ashes* vent the speakers' jaundiced views of the Irish education system; but, as with other issues in her book, O'Faolain's handling of her reaction to school is more subtle than McCourt's. The Catholic girls' school O'Faolain went to was full of Spartan deprivation, as "[a]ny luxury was most intensely felt" – be it an extra pat of butter or the little altars made to Mary in May (34), yet O'Faolain is capable of remembering that it was "full of tingling excitement, too" (35). Whilst O'Faolain feels dread when she happens to re-visit the school as an adult, the visit shows her that, for all their disciplinarianism, the nuns were concerned for their charges (39). Furthermore, O'Faolain is

able to see school as the place where she received her training in the “affective dimension that was to matter most” in her life: female-female relationships (35).

In contrast, McCourt’s schooling is portrayed as being straightforwardly horrid, as in the following representative passage:

[The teacher] tells us we’re a disgrace to Ireland and her long sad history, that we’d be better off in Africa praying to bush or tree. He tells us we’re hopeless, the worst class he ever had for First Communion but as sure as God made little apples he’ll make Catholics of us, he’ll beat the idler out of us and the Sanctifying Grace into us.

Brendan Quigley raises his hand. We call him Question Quigley because he’s always asking questions. He can’t help himself. Sir, he says, what’s Sanctifying Grace?

The master rolls his eyes to heaven. He’s going to kill Quigley. Instead he barks at him, Never mind what’s Sanctifying Grace, Quigley. That’s none of your business. You’re here to learn the catechism and do what you’re told. You’re not here to be asking questions. There are too many people wandering the world asking questions and that’s what has us in the state we’re in and if I find any boy in this class asking questions I won’t be responsible for what happens. (130)

Shortly thereafter, Quigley forgets himself and asks another perfectly innocent question out of childish curiosity. This results in his being beaten all over his body by an uncontrollably

irate teacher. Blubbering, Quigley swears he will “never ask a question again sir” (131), which is indubitably the effect wanted by colonial educators, and those who uncritically adopted their techniques.

While the malevolence of the teacher may seem over-emphasised, and while the teacher’s statements seem so absurdly ironic as to be invented (or at least exaggerated for comic effect), a great deal of anecdotal evidence from Ireland suggests that this type of interchange would have been far from unusual. What is also well established is the conflation, revealed in this passage, between nationalism, (seen in the reference to Ireland’s “long sad history”), religion, and education.

The Church’s participation in Irish education has long been taken for granted. Reverend E. Cahill, writing in 1925, felt confident that in certain matters (including education), the Church’s authority was superior to that of the state (Titley 122). Brendan Ryan comments that in Ireland, “[m]ost of education is run without legislation and with limited public accountability” (13). While bought by the state, schools are legally owned by patrons (usually bishops), which means that any vacated school’s redeployment rests in the hands of a bishop. This is one of the reasons multi-denominational schools struggle to exist (14), as is also the case in the North, a fact which undoubtedly fuels the Northern Irish problem (Watson). Similarly, Brian Moore wonders whether Ireland and Ulster’s problems “are a result of poor education, a blinkered education” (Carlson 115).

Ryan also asserts that, in Ireland, the local clergy clandestinely, yet crucially, veto potential

teachers (15). Constitutionally, Irish schools are open to children of all religions. Practically, school teachers generally have connections to the Catholic church. This ensures the perpetuation of the cyclic relationship between Church, state and education in Ireland.

Declan Kiberd has said of Irish schools that they have “remained obsessed with a hyperacademic form of learning, derived from the colonial period, which tested new recruits for the swelling civil service” (522)⁶. Consequently, despite the Catholic church’s brand of oppositionally-defined Irish nationalism permeating the education system in terms of content (“we were told the Irish were always noble and made brave speeches before the English hanged them” (McCourt, *Ashes* 236)), in terms of form, or structure, the educational system was still a colonial one, which encouraged mind-numbing rote learning, and discouraged independent thinking and questioning (Harrison in Kiberd 553). In an interview with Zinsser, McCourt comments about his school life: “Everything was memorizing, memorizing, memorizing. You were never encouraged to look at yourself as a future memoirist, never encouraged to look inward” (“Leaving” 65). Similarly, O’Faolain’s memoir is at least in part about her learning to overcome that lack of self-reflexivity which was so evident in her younger years, an example of which is a claim she makes about herself in the 1970s: “it never occurred to me that I needed to interrogate myself” (47).

If the form of Irish education which was adopted after independence was still a colonial one, so too was the propensity to censor material a colonial legacy, a fact which has already been discussed in the first chapter. When speaking about censorship in Ireland, Julia Carlson claims that it “has created a rift in Irish society, fostering the ignorance and provincialism of

the Irish people and the intellectual and moral alienation of Irish writers” (2). While I am sceptical of Carlson’s claim about the “moral” alienation of Irish writers, her point about Irish people’s “provincialism” seems to hold, especially when one considers the degree of repression in Irish society. Brian Moore describes Ireland as a “small, repressive country” (Carlson 117), and “repression” is a key word in the Carlson interviews. After writing *Judith Hearne*, Moore received “hundreds of letters from women in America and England and Ireland saying, ‘I know somebody like that’” (Carlson 114). This reaction is strangely similar to the feedback given to O’Faolain after the publication of her memoir, which might well have something to do with what Ryan has called the “Irish secrecy culture” (43) being broken. Says Ryan: “We take our secrecy very seriously in Ireland, and all our institutions work to maintain it” (3). In effect, *Are you Somebody?* and *Angela’s Ashes* shatter this secrecy by exposing the patriarchal social climate of Ireland, the brutality of teachers and priests, and the sheer misery of Irish poverty, amongst other things.

Of course, other writers, for instance Joyce, have written about such issues before, but the two memoirs were seen to be revelatory because the parochial, ethically moribund society had not been exposed to Joyce. Worldwide, we may consider Joyce to be quintessentially Irish, but as Moore says: “well-educated people in Dublin just hadn’t read him. . . . Joyce was a major Irish writer whom no one knew” (Carlson 112).

If McCourt and O’Faolain are engaged in the telling of “national secrets”, then their chosen genre is a perfect one. William Zinsser has argued that this is “the age of the memoir”, (the “ultimate symbol” of which, he claims, is *Angela’s Ashes*) because memoir is “the perfect

product of our confessional times” (3). Once more, the changing social climate in Ireland – in particular its growing secularism – has not only allowed the challenges to the Church contained in the memoirs to be taken seriously, but the memoirs themselves might have served the cathartic process previously reserved for the confessional box. Indeed, the outpouring of letters to O’Faolain, the identification with her story, not to mention the anonymity of many of the respondents, indicate that they felt the need to confide in, if not confess to, O’Faolain, just as she had “confessed” to her readers.

McCourt’s memoir can also be seen as confessional⁷. Some might say that this is because of the “brutal honesty” with which he exposes what could be seen as private events – for instance his enjoyment of masturbation (386). However, what is particularly interesting is the narrative voice, which uses the historical present tense, and which many reviewers agreed was the cohesive force within the memoir. Julian Moynahan has asked, in a review of *Angela’s Ashes*: “Whatever became of the oral tradition – of confidences exchanged *sotto voce* in barrooms and over backyard fences, between strangers on a train or plane, among revellers at a banquet table or around an outdoor barbeque?” (1). I would argue that *Angela’s Ashes* is commercially successful precisely because the narrative voice captures the tone of that oral tradition. Furthermore, the lack of dialogic punctuation leads to a sense of the incorporation of the speaking voice into the very narrative. As such, the mode of expression in *Angela’s Ashes* has the suggestion of orality, and this augments the confessional spirit of the memoir.

The “confessional” mode of memoir is one about which much has been written. A feminist

critique by Leigh Gilmore offers some speculations which I believe one can apply to *Angela's Ashes* and *Are You Somebody?*, despite the fact that Gilmore is writing specifically about women's "autobiographics". In response to an argument by Rita Felski, Gilmore argues that:

Whereas Felski finds the confessional aspect of contemporary women's writing naive, I would say that women find in confession discourse a subject position that grants them the authority from which to make truth claims. . . . [T]he extent to which its subjects police themselves and strive to produce a "truthful" account defines them as highly "self"-conscious. (225)

I have already argued that *Are You Somebody?* chronicles the increasing self-consciousness and self-reflexivity of O'Faolain – the culmination of which is the publication of the memoir itself. Furthermore, as I postulated in Chapter Two, McCourt's narrative of his life reveals an utter "self"-absorption, and the logical conclusion to *Angela's Ashes*, *'Tis*, chronicles in a more self-reflexive manner, the way in which his memoirs were born. But despite this obvious self-consciousness, the question remains as to what kind of "truth" these writers have accessed, or devised.

Gilmore says: "Although many women are positioned within confessional discourse as liars, they engage in a "reverse" discourse by speaking within the confession as truthful subjects" (226). While her point may hold that women have historically been regarded as embellishers of the truth, so too have Irish people. In fact, one reviewer of *Angela's Ashes* explicitly alludes to this fact when she says that McCourt's "powers of recall seem a little too powerful:

the word ‘blarney’ occasionally shimmers between the lines” (Hluchy 55).

Gilmore continues that in order to be taken seriously as truth-tellers, therefore, women (and, I would argue other perceived liars, like Irish people), “must be aware of what the dominant culture values and identifies as truth” (226). It might be precisely McCourt’s attempt to do this which results in his employment of such stereotyped caricatures of Irish identity, as these caricatures are assumed by a non-Irish audience to be “truthful” renditions of Irish personalities. Yet, as common sense tells us, stereotypes are only exaggerated aspects of one aspect of a whole “truth”, and so his desire to meet a culture’s expectations is not necessarily an “authentic” representation of his own experience.

However, postmodern philosophy warns us to be sceptical of such normative claims about the “truth” of “authentic” representations of existence. As Zinsser has noted about the genre of memoir, based on his own experience: “the boy’s remembered truth is different from his parents’ remembered truth” (7). Indeed, O’Faolain can reach no consensus with her siblings with regard to the “truth” about her parents’ lives. About her mother, O’Faolain does not agree with her sister, claiming that Katherine was not as bad an alcoholic as the sister thought (182), whilst O’Faolain’s brother Don says: “It’s surprising that a sister and a brother can view the same father in such different lights” (233).

Similarly, there is clearly some degree of diverse remembering between the respective views of Frank McCourt and Richard Harris, indicated by Harris’s claim that McCourt is an “unreliable chronicler of facts” (Harris), as discussed in Chapter Two. This is despite the fact

that at least two of the McCourt siblings seem to have concurred on the basic elements in their respective memoirs: Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* and *'Tis*, and Malachy McCourt's *A Monk Swimming*. In one of the best reviews of these three memoirs, entitled "'Tisn't: the Million-Dollar Blarney of the McCourts", R.F. Foster argues that all three books are "very, very far from the whole story" (33), saying that in *Angela's Ashes*, "people are identified by formulaic straplines, which are trundled out again and again each time they appear", citing as an example Pa Keating, who is seemingly "never introduced without declaring he doesn't give 'a fiddler's fart' for respectable opinion" (30).

Yet surely a memoir (even more than an autobiography⁸) is a presentation of a "slice" of "reality" as seen through the subjective eyes of the author? Zinsser has argued that memoir entails "two elements – one of art, the other of craft". The aspect of "art" is "how we try to make sense of who we are, who we once were, and what values and heritage shaped us", which is akin to the process of developing a sense of what I have termed "personal identity". On the other hand, the element of craft, which Zinsser argues is an equally essential component of memoir, is a process of manufacturing, or carpentry, "imposing order on a jumble of half-remembered events. With that feat of manipulation," argues Zinsser, memoirists "arrive at a truth that is theirs alone, not quite like that of anybody else who was present at the same events" (6). To this end, it is what is said, every bit as much as what is not said, which "crafts" the memoir in this way, as Gilmore argues when she says that

foundational claims to identity and truth, that is, the knowability of identity through a separable and single attribute that would make the whole picture make sense [for example, Irishness], are contingent upon repressing

information that would make the picture not make the same kind of sense or
 information that may not be fully visible or even susceptible to revelation.

(227)

Evidently, the process of “forgetting” is as important as the process of “remembering” in the writing of a memoir, just as it is in the formulation of a national identity, as Gellner and Renan have argued. The ways in which O’Faolain and McCourt have “remembered” what they have written, and “forgotten” what is omitted, have led to the generation of their particular brands of “personal” and “national” identity as they are expressed in the memoirs.

These personal identities, and their effects on the national identities of both authors, can be tellingly illustrated by a concluding comment about the style of both memoirs. Both McCourt and O’Faolain are self-conscious writers who are aware of literary tropes and precedents: McCourt was an English teacher – teaching writing skills to his American classes, while O’Faolain taught and lectured in English.

O’Faolain describes how learning to read was the second most important event in her life, and recounts the joy she gets from reading (23-26). In particular, she enjoys the work of “introspective”, modernist writers like James, Yeats, Eliot, and Joyce, to name a few (28), while she struggles to enjoy “a few writers who don’t make up in anything for their lack of inner life – Chaucer, a lot of Balzac, Scott, the jollier Dickens, Salman Rushdie” (26) . The legacy of this literary preference can be seen in the inward focus of O’Faolain’s own writing, where her introspective self-reflexivity is precisely what allows for the complex negotiation

between her “personal” and “national” identity, which, as I argued in Chapter Three, ultimately concludes with O’Faolain having found a balance between the representativeness of possessing a “national” identity, versus the singularity of her “personal” identity.

In contrast, McCourt’s style is substantially less introspective, and his book is more a comment on Irish society than a cerebral interrogation of “self”. In fact, many reviewers of *Angela’s Ashes* have claimed that McCourt’s work is “Dickensian”. Moynahan compares the child narrator in *Angela’s Ashes* to those in *Great Expectations* and *David Copperfield* (3), and the cruel school master to those in *Nicholas Nickelby* (5). Acherson claims that “Mccourt introduces his city with a gloomy relish worthy of Dickens” (4). As mentioned in the previous chapter, O’Faolain herself actually called McCourt “Our first Irish Dickens” (Mccourt n.p.).

It is interesting that O’Faolain, in an approving review of *Angela’s Ashes*, should make this comparison, considering that in her own memoir she is of the opinion that Dickens (albeit “the jollier Dickens”) lacks “inner life”. One assumes by this that O’Faolain is referring to the fact that Dickens has the propensity to cast fairly prefigured characters into his books, characters who lack the “inner life” O’Faolain seems to admire so. This is not to deny that Dickens is capable of tracing sophisticated character developments, as for example in Pip of *Great Expectations*. However, Dickens’s social commentary is facilitated by his employment of character “types”, while its subtlety derives from the more developed character analyses. In essence, sketching such emblematic characters is what McCourt has done in utilising what R. F. Foster (quoted above) has termed “formulaic straplines”, whereby McCourt presents the

“pious defeated mother”, the “shiftless loquacious alcoholic father”, “pompous priests”, and “bullying schoolmasters” (McCourt, *Ashes* 1). Yet McCourt’s text reveals a dearth of the more developed Dickensian characters, and so his analysis lacks some of Dickens’s intricacy.

Accordingly, McCourt fails to move meaningfully beyond the re-appropriated colonial stereotypes of Irish identity which informed the earlier cultural nationalism of Yeats, and consequently, the expression of his “personal” identity is synonymous with the articulation of certain stereotypes about his being Irish, his national identity. To fail to move beyond such stereotypes in such a changed social context as Ireland in the 1990s undoubtedly is, is to fail to render a complex, enriching portrait of a culturally rich and complex land. In contrast, Nuala O’Faolain, writing from Ireland, where she lives and which she is “getting to know now” (160), offers the reader a considerably more subtle account of the ambivalences, tensions, and possible marriage between her personal and national identity – between the singularity of her private experiences, and the representativeness of what she means to Irish readers, and what Ireland means to her. To quote Flanagan, Ireland now is “a new Ireland, torn between nostalgia and a contempt for nostalgia” (6). McCourt revels in the nostalgia factor (despite his miserable childhood), thus earning him the contempt of some, whilst O’Faolain’s awareness of the artificiality (yet usefulness) of such nostalgia leads her account to be more nuanced. McCourt’s Ireland is reductively over-simplified, but O’Faolain’s gives credit to a complex Ireland, undergoing rapid economic, cultural, religious and social change.

Notes

1. To use Spivak's words, these women came to be caught between "child-bearing and soul making", between "domestic-society-through-sexual-reproduction cathected as 'companionate love' . . . [and] the imperialist project cathected as civil-society-through-social-mission" ("Three Women's Texts" 244).
2. The title of Joseph (brother of Sinéad) O'Connor's *Cowboys and Indians* (1991), which is set in Dublin, certainly plays on this figure of the White Indian.
3. Both authors are evidently aware of their audiences. In Chapter Two, I examined McCourt's awareness of his audience in some depth. In Chapter Three, I discussed how O'Faolain was keenly aware of potential receptions to her memoir, but this related more specifically to an Irish audience, as O'Faolain had not the confidence to believe her book could cast a wider net. Evidently, this was unfounded, and the 1998 edition of her book proudly bears the claim, "The International Bestseller", and includes selected journalism which is designed (presumably) to assist overseas readers in understanding certain social conditions which O'Faolain takes for granted in her memoir, as one would do if one postulated a local audience. Furthermore, the subtitle of the American edition of her memoir, *The Accidental Memoir of a Dublin Woman* tellingly foregrounds her Irish, urban and gendered identity.
4. Neal Ascherson is just one person who has commented on the increasing secularisation of Ireland, but he has done so particularly well:

Ireland, in the last few years, has had more posts driven into her small patch of earth than any other country of the world. It was post-British and post-colonial for some decades. But now, in quick succession, it has become post-unionist, post-tribalist, post-nationalist . . . and finally post-Catholic. About the only space left in this fence is that reserved for “post-Partition” Ireland.

(1)

5. It would seem that despite the dysfunctional family lives one is exposed to in Irish literature, drama and song, the institution of the family, as an ISA, is still held to be sacred. Although Ireland is admittedly small, one could almost argue that there is an Irish obsession with the family not only in the world of literature, but also in the realm of politics, where descendants of De Valera are still in the Dáil, (Parliament), and in the public sphere where family members tend to follow in one another’s footsteps. With regard to the latter, the McCourt and O’Faolain families are examples of this: Frank and Malachy have both happened into the limelight after publishing their memoirs, and certainly some interest in O’Faolain’s book must have been generated by the fact of her being Terry O’Sullivan’s daughter. Other acclaimed members of families who have been mentioned in this dissertation include Jim and Peter Sheridan, and Joseph and Sinéad O’Connor.

The recent (1995) referendum on divorce in Ireland, which was won only by a tiny majority, made it explicit just how important the institution of the family is in Ireland (O’Toole 124-129). Even the supposedly progressive 30-year-olds surveyed in “The New Grown-Ups” have conservative attitudes about divorce (“The New Grown-Ups”).

6. Apparently Irish schools emphasised languages – English, Irish, Latin and Greek – over science and technology (Kiberd 552). This focus seems to bolster colonial binaries with the “feminine” colonised country being concerned with the supposedly “secondary” arts of linguistics and communication, while the colonisers from Britain are associated with rationality and science, which more literally change the world.

However, one wonders to what extent Ireland’s school curriculum is changing as a result of Ireland’s economic growth which is partially a consequence of its becoming a major world Information Technology hub. If schools’ curricula are changing, as anecdotal evidence would seem to suggest, then Irish schoolchildren are being given different tools for “identity formation” (from identifying with poets and priests to world leaders), and this could be taken as further proof of an evolutionary shift in the Irish construction of national identities.

7. O’Faolain and McCourt are obviously not alone in sharing their Irish “secrets” with the world. Paddy Doyle’s account of the humiliating and truly damaging treatment he received in the hands of state and Church workers, *The God Squad* (1988), has been credited with being one of the first books to give “first-hand testimony” about his abuse, which the Church could not ignore (O’Toole 105). One other example of someone who engages in confessional autobiography is Joseph O’Connor. The title of his semi-autobiographical book, *The Secret World of the Irish Male*, not only indicates that he is engaged in this telling of secrets, but also reveals his assumption of categorical belonging: he is one of a type, and that type is *the* Irish male.

8. This distinction is only relevant if we understand memoirs to be more specifically focussed on a “particular period and place” than autobiographies tend to be (Zinsser 3). In terms of this definition, *Are You Somebody?* is more “autobiographical”, as it traces the narrative of the writer’s life from birth to present, while admittedly focussing more on certain times of O’Faolain’s life. Nevertheless, she herself calls the book a “memoir” (xi), and I have remained faithful to that description.

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